



What Do First-line Leaders Need to Succeed?: Identification and Validation of Competencies of First-line Leaders in High Involvement Organizations

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Increasingly, organizations are seeking competitive advantage by adopting "high involvement strategies." As organizations make the transition to these methods, however, supervisor resistance increases. Supervisors are not rewarded for helping teams succeed, nor are they provided with the training necessary to succeed. This study examined the issue of how to identify and validate the competencies of first-line leaders in these organizations. A literature search, focus group discussions, and surveys yielded a list of eight competencies.



A significant shift in the management paradigm is taking place in many North American businesses. Large numbers of organizations are taking a new road to increased productivity by discarding old, hierarchical management methods in favor of "high involvement" strategies (e.g. teams, TQM, peer review). This shift is taking place because of a number of factors, not the least of which is competitive pressure from other parts of the world (Reich, 1988). Schlesinger (1983) has documented other forces moving companies toward high involvement methods: the increased education level of entry-level workers, the increased aspirations of these workers, increased managerial concern for productivity, and a growing belief that greater worker participation will lead to increased worker satisfaction. In a survey of 845 line managers, Industry Week and Wyatt Co. (Moskal, 1991, January 21) found still more forces encouraging this shift: the need to increase employee commitment; encourage innovation; push accountability downward. Changing employee values and corporate cultures, the need to improve employee retention, and reduce management layers were also cited as reasons why many organizations are looking to new methods for managing their businesses.



While these forces are pushing organizations to change, however, countervailing forces are standing as barriers to this change. Supervisor and manager resistance to high involvement methods is one of the greatest of these barriers. Walton and Schlesinger (1979) documented three significant supervisor-related barriers: the skills needed by supervisors to succeed in the new high involvement organization are consistently underestimated; adequate skill development is not provided for supervisors trying to make the transition; and reward systems fail to tie supervisory evaluation to team development. In addition to failing to give adequate support to supervisors in organizations changing over to high involvement methods, Harrison (1992) found that supervisors are frequently left out of vital phases of the implementation process. In Harrison's survey of 30 companies, 17% of the supervisors responding said they were not involved in the implementation of high involvement methods, while 23% said they were involved only in the implementation of the change, not in the planning of the change. Klein (1984); Manz, Keating, and Donnellon (1990); and Lawler (1990) have all reported similar reactions to the installation of high involvement systems.



This paper will examine the question: **What do first-line leaders (supervisors, leads, foremen, team leaders) need to succeed in a high involvement organization?** To answer this question, characteristics of high involvement management methods will be described. The paper will then proceed to outline a research project sponsored by Employers Association, Inc. of Minneapolis, MN. Methods of this project and the results of the project will be described. Finally, conclusions and implications of the study will be offered.

Characteristics of High Involvement Management

Mohrman, Ledford, Lawler, and Mohrman (1986) have stated that the high involvement "paradigm has not yet become a well-established or completely coherent alternative to the traditional management paradigm" (p. 190), and is, therefore, difficult to define. The term "high involvement"

is often defined in relation to other management practices. Mohrman et al. (1986) related high involvement to "quality of work life" (QWL), "employee involvement" (EI), and "sociotechnical design." They cited six tenets of the high involvement paradigm. The first is that power should be shared with the lower levels of the organization. Second, they stress the ". . . importance of open communication in organizations and [the movement of] operating information to lower levels" (p. 191). A third foundation of the high involvement paradigm is the development of skills and abilities of workers. In a high involvement organization, the mission of training goes beyond giving workers skills for their immediate job. In addition, workers are cross-trained in the jobs of their peers as well as in some management skills: interviewing, conducting performance appraisals, disciplining inappropriate behavior. A fourth tenet of the high involvement paradigm is that rewards are based on organizational performance and should be awarded to all levels of the organization, not just the executive level. A fifth tenet asserts that "stakeholders" in an HIO include customers and employees, as well as the traditional stakeholders, i.e. "owners." Sixth, the HIO strives to design all of its subsystems--training, work design, rewards, information, and so on--so that all of these subsystems work in concert. This is an important point of distinction between high involvement organizations and organizations which use selected employee involvement tactics. The high involvement organization recognizes that an employee involvement tactic, (e.g. self-directed work teams), can be undermined by subsystems which are not designed to increase employee involvement. For instance, the compensation system in the organization may encourage competition between employees instead of cooperation, thus blunting the involvement benefits of the team approach. In the high involvement organization, subsystems are focused on motivating workers, giving them the information they need to do their jobs, designing work that is motivational, and giving workers the autonomy they need to do their jobs.

A synthesis of these perspectives on the high involvement organization yields these fundamental defining characteristics of a high involvement organization:


- All subsystems of the organization should be designed to maximize worker motivation, ease information transfer, and flexibility to meet the demands of the environment.
- Rewards for work should emphasize the intrinsic value of the work. Monetary rewards should be based on organization-wide performance, and should be distributed as widely as possible within the organization.
- Information must flow freely from the environment into the organization and from one part of the organization to another.
- Self-regulation of oneself and self-leadership of the team is essential.
- Power and authority are distributed throughout the organization based on practical, not bureaucratic, principles.

Operationally, high involvement methods include combining a wide variety of innovative management methods into an integrated system in which all methods support each other. These methods typically include: annual performance appraisals, in which there is substantial employee input; career counseling; suggestion systems; experiments using employee ideas for system improvement; "state of the business" meetings; education for employees on how the business is measured; cross-training; information exchange meetings; direct feedback from customers to employees; feedback from employees to vendors and suppliers; employee-made operating decisions; employee participation in hiring decisions (Lawler and Mohrman, 1989). In a survey conducted by the Association for Quality and Participation (1993), 711 members of the association reported that the use of these and other practices ranged from 53% ("autonomous work groups") to 3% ("peer reviews").

As an organization implements these high involvement methods, first-line leaders ask, "What is left for me to do?" Walton and Schlesinger (1979), and more recently Lawler (1988, 1990), have documented that, as organizations shift from hierarchical management to high involvement methods, more responsibility is placed in the hands of teams. Sabier (1990) has extended this trend to the point that, in organizations with extensive use of high involvement methods, traditional supervisor functions of hiring, firing, delegating, training become functions of the whole work system, not just a class of workers. In such a transition, the role conflict of the supervisor, who has traditionally been "caught in the middle," becomes even greater. The results of this study will suggest some new directions for supervisory work and development.

Methods and Results

This study focused on the questions, "What are the competencies needed by first-line leaders in high involvement organizations?" and "Is there a difference in perception of these first-line leader competencies among first-line leaders, their employees, and their managers?" To answer the first question, a three phase process was followed: (1) literature search; (2) focus group discussions; (3) surveys. To accomplish the first two phases, a subject matter analysis (Swanson and Gradous, 1986) was conducted to gather information from the high involvement literature, as well as from companies actually using high involvement methods. Fourteen articles from the literature were identified which listed discreet competencies of first-line leaders. A preliminary synthesis of these articles yielded seven competencies. The researcher then contacted sixteen companies which had received site visits from the Minnesota Council for Quality within the previous three years as part of the selection process for the Minnesota Quality Award to determine their willingness to participate in the study. Five companies agreed to participate by making groups of employees available for focus group discussions of first-line leader competencies. These focus groups generally had 8 to 10 participants, at least 50% of whom were first-line leaders. Each focus group was asked to generate lists of duties and tasks of first-line leaders in their organizations, the outputs of the first-line leaders job, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by first-line leaders to do their job. The focus groups' lists were compared with the lists found in the literature and a final list of eight competencies was developed:

 **BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT SKILLS**- the ability to establish and maintain healthy boundaries between team members and between teams.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SKILLS- the ability to carry out management duties- planning, organizing, controlling, staffing, delegating, evaluating performance- and teach others how to carry out these duties; the ability to analyze the skill and career development needs of others; the ability to support the process of creating, implementing, and evaluating training programs.

INCLUSION, AFFILIATION, INTEGRATION SKILLS- the ability to help employees feel included in the business of the company; the ability to build strong ties of loyalty between employees and the company.

MENTORING SKILLS- the ability to encourage workers to use essential elements in self-management.

PERSONAL QUALITIES- flexibility, trustworthiness, endurance, willingness to admit that one may be wrong, patience, sense of fairness, resiliency, realism, up-beat attitude, organization skills.

QUALITY SKILLS- knowledge of quality processes, including problem-solving, statistical process control, the use of Pareto diagrams, action planning, and evaluation of quality improvement projects.

SUPPORT SKILLS FOR INNOVATION AND CHANGE- the ability to encourage, solicit, and implement employee-generated ideas of system improvement.

TEAM FACILITATION SKILLS- the ability to form and support teams in the workplace.



 Phase Three (Survey) was accomplished by asking six companies to distribute a four page survey to a randomly selected group of their employees. Three levels--first-line leaders, their employees, and their managers--were to be represented. The results of the surveys are presented in Tables 1 and 2. To answer the second question of the study pertaining to different perceptions of the first-line leaders job, a fourth phase (Analysis) was carried out. This phase involved conducting an ANOVA of the survey results to determine if there were significant differences in the perceptions of importance and skill needed among the survey groups. Using a criteria of $p < .05$, the survey results showed that the three groups did not have different perceptions of "importance," except in the category of "Support Skills for Innovation and Change." First-line leaders rated this skill significantly more important than the other two groups. As to perceptions of "skill needed," first-line leaders rated "Mentoring Skills" and "Team Facilitation" skills as requiring significantly more skill than the other two groups rated these skills.

Table 1 

Importance Ratings of Eight Competencies of First-line Leaders

Management	(n=23)	First-line Leaders	(n=64)	Employees	(n=206)
Personal Qualities	3.96	Personal Qualities	3.81	Personal Qualities	3.78
Mentoring Skills	3.73	Mentoring Skills	3.67	Mentoring Skills	3.56
Quality Skills	3.48	Support Skills for Innovation and Change	3.66	Human Resource Management Skills	3.55
Boundary Management Skills	3.44	Human Resource Management Skills	3.66	Inclusion, Affiliation, Integration Skills	3.54
Human Resource Management Skills	3.44	Quality Skills	3.58	Support Skills for Innovation and Change	3.49
Inclusion, Affiliation, and Integration Skills	3.30	Team Facilitation Skills	3.52	Boundary Management Skills	3.43
Team Facilitation Skills	3.26	Inclusion, Affiliation, Integration Skills	3.52	Team Facilitation Skills	3.43
Support Skills for Innovation and Change	3.22	Boundary Management Skills	3.45	Quality Skills	3.42

1=Not at all; 2= Minimal importance; 3= Somewhat important; 4= Very important.

Table 2

Skill Level Needed Ratings of Eight Competencies of First-line Leaders

Managers (n=23)	First-line Leaders (n=64)	Employees (n=206)
Personal Qualities	3.91	4.03
Mentoring Skills	3.91	3.94
Team Facilitation Skills	3.82	3.92
Human Resource Management Skills	3.74	3.84
Inclusion, Affiliation, and Integration Skills	3.74	3.82
Support Skills for Innovation and Change	3.65	3.80
Quality Skills	3.61	3.80
Boundary Management Skills	3.61	3.78

1= Basic; 2=Basic to Intermediate; 3= Intermediate; 4= Intermediate to Advanced; 5= Advanced

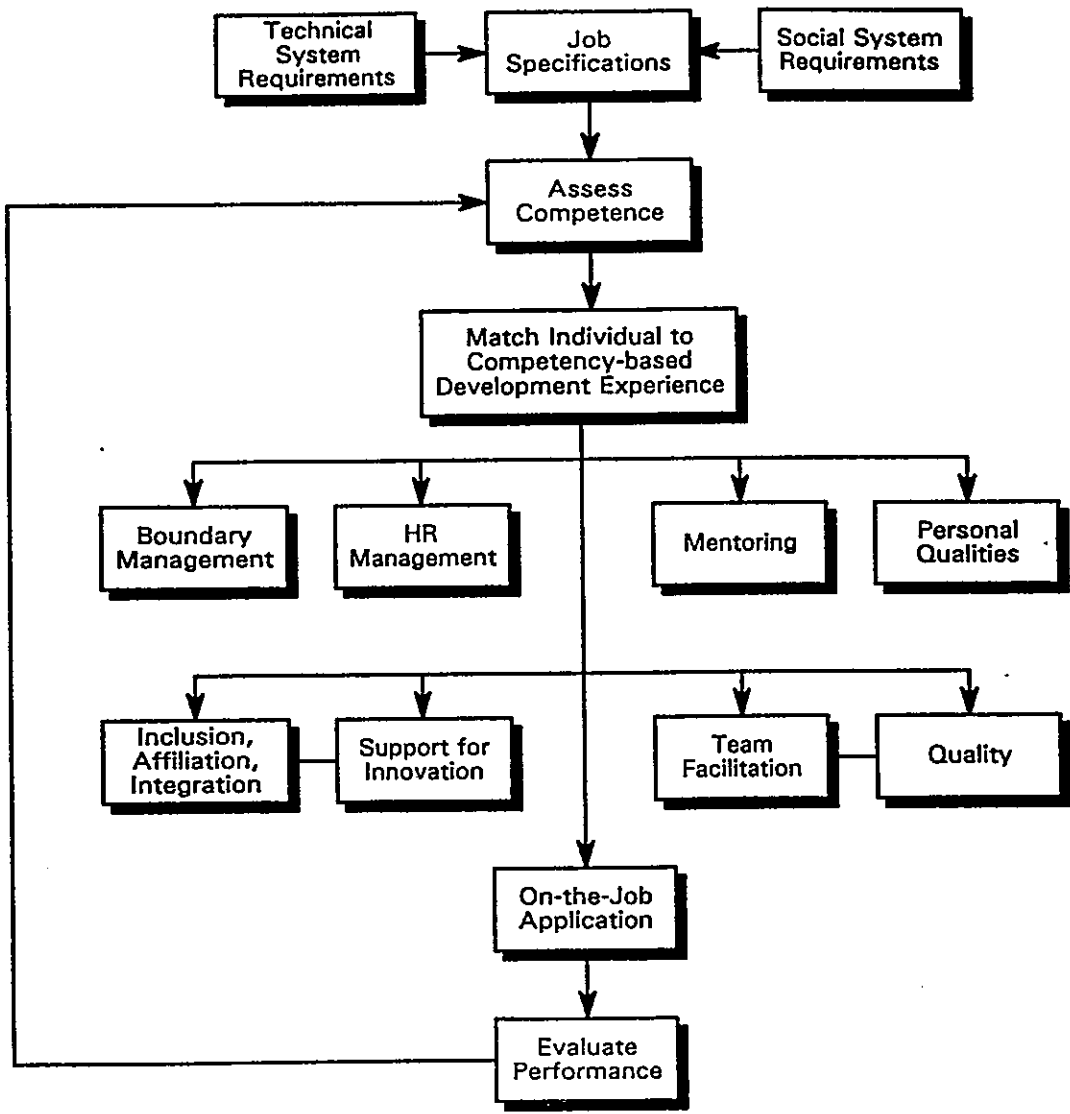


Figure 1. Competency-based Human Resource Management System for First-line Leaders.

Conclusions and Implications

Drucker (1983, June 7) has said that "no other job will change more in the next decade than that of the supervisor; and no group is less prepared for this change than the supervisors themselves" (p. 28). The literature about high involvement organizations certainly suggests that these innovative organizations will require a whole new set of capabilities from first-line leaders. When the results of this study are examined, however, an evolution, not a revolution, is detected. Certainly, the skills of "Team Facilitation," "Quality Skills," and "Support for Innovation and Change" are consistent with the themes found in the high involvement literature. At the same, the skills of "Human Resource Management" and "Personal Qualities" harken back to the earliest writings on the role of the first-line leader (e.g., Federal Board for Vocational Education, 1919). These results suggest that even organizations which represent a high level of employee involvement retain the first-line leader as a key player in the management scheme. The results of this study imply a competency-based approach to developing first-line leaders, as suggested in Figure 1. The results of this study suggest that such an approach would be a fruitful one to follow for internal and external HRD professionals.

As more data is gathered about the nature of high involvement organizations, it would do well for HRD professionals to gather more information about the role of the first-line leader in these settings, based on the size of the company, its industry, geographic location, history of high involvement practices, and pervasiveness of their use. As much as some would like to suggest the demise of the first-line leader, it appears the role will have to be played by someone and they will need training and development to carry out the role well.

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