

The Importance Of Top Management Visibility For Service-Based Professionals

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How important is it for top managers to be visible in their companies? Hambrick and Mason (1984) argue that organizations are reflections of their top managers, and thus organizational outcomes are significantly influenced by the values, beliefs and actions of these top managers. They suggest that organizations do not operate on inertia or run themselves, but that top managers play a critical role— they matter. According to Schein (1985), top managers create organizations and strive to shape behavior by the development of a culture of shared beliefs.

The importance of the top management role in shaping the decisions, strategies and functioning of the firm is well documented (e.g., Bernard, 1938; Child, 1972; Gardner, 1990; Hambrick and Brandon, 1988; Hunt, 1991; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985; Tichy and DeVanna, 1986). By definition, top management includes managers who serve at the top of the organizational hierarchy and are responsible for the entire organization (Daft, 1991; Zaleznik, 1990). Top management visibility—being seen around the company—is an important symbolic ingredient of management effectiveness (Carlzon, 1987; Niehoff et al., 1990).

Top manager visibility captures the degree to which those in command of an organization are physically visible in the workplace. While some top managers are visible on a daily basis, others seem to use their office as a pit-stop and conduct the majority of their business outside of the workplace. It is the objective of this study to investigate the importance of top management visibility for professional employees of a service sector firm. By service firm, we mean an organization that does not produce a tangible good per se, but provides a service to the customer (Bowen et al., 1990).

Top management visibility is important because it serves a symbolic function, signaling that someone is actively in command of the organization. By being visible in the workplace, top managers can build effective working relationships with subordinates, assess subordinate capabilities, establish expectations for how the firm should be run, and guide aspiring top managers. While clearly top management visibility is not the only factor of importance, it is one of the most evident ways in which leaders can model a vision for the organization (Bass, 1990; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Vaill, 1989). These socialization and role modeling functions performed by top managers have been identified as important in the work of Garbarro (1979), who notes that top managers must socialize subordinates because they are highly dependent on others to successfully operate the firm.

While top manager visibility may affect the operation of the firm and the attitudes and behaviors of subordinates, it is likely that different groups of subordinates will be differentially affected. Subordinates who are customer-oriented may place less importance on the visibility of top managers because their roles are more clearly defined, they are less dependent on the guidance of top managers, they are further

from the top managers physically, and they marginally identify with the company by serving a boundary-spanning role. A study of upper management alienation revealed that the greater the service contact, the less an individual perceived him/herself as unable to understand or control the work setting (Hofstede, 1976). Thus, it is possible that service professionals who have daily contact with customers do not require the guidance of top managers to dictate behaviors or shape attitudes and therefore will not consider top management visibility important.

In contrast, workers who have little contact with the customer and perform activities that are exclusively linked to the internal operation of the firm may rely more on members of the top management team to provide guidance in the form of feedback, encouragement, and training, and therefore assign greater importance to their visibility. Hence, top managers, by their mere presence (visibility), may serve a valuable role in guiding workers with an internal service focus.

In this study, the importance of top management visibility is examined by comparing the perceptions of different groups of professional employees. Professionals were selected for study because they are more dependent on top manager directives than are nonprofessional workers (e.g., accounts payable clerks, typists or data entry employees), who typically perform more routine, rule-guided tasks. Of particular interest in this study is determining whether professionals who serve different constituencies (i.e., those inside versus outside of the firm) differ in their assessments of top management visibility. Does the nature of the professional's orientation influence the importance of top management visibility?

Clearly there are a variety of other factors that might affect the degree to which a professional considers top management visibility to be important. The degree of global job satisfaction the employee experiences is likely to reflect general approval of the manner in which top managers manage the organization (Locke, 1976). To the extent that this occurs, job satisfaction may affect the degree to which employees enjoy seeing top managers, thereby affecting the level of importance that they attach to top management visibility. The level of commitment an employee feels toward an organization is also likely to affect perceived importance of top management visibility. A committed employee identifies with the organization (Porter et al., 1974). To the extent that an employee is committed, the level of importance the employee attaches to top management visibility will likely increase because of the similarity that the committed employee perceives between him/herself and the top management of the organization. In a similar fashion, the degree to which employees are attracted to and/or share values with top managers may influence the degree to which they consider top management visibility to be important. Professionals who are attracted to top management are likely to express this attraction, in part, by assigning importance to top management visibility. Employees are also likely to be influenced by the degree to which they perceive themselves to share similar values with top management (Enz, 1986; 1988; Meglino et al., 1992). Those who feel that they share values with top management will appreciate, and thereby assign importance to, opportunities to see top managers. Finally, the extent to which an employee experiences role ambiguity may influence the level of importance assigned to top management visibility because of the role clarification function that top management visibility likely provides. Since these factors might distort or confound the primary purpose of this study—to examine differences in the importance of top management visibility based on service focus and customer contact—the five variables noted above (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, attraction, value similarity and role ambiguity) are systematically controlled.

Based on the definition of top management visibility provided earlier, and the existing evidence suggesting that service contact differentially influences work attitudes, the following hypotheses are provided:

Hypothesis 1: *Professionals with an insider service focus will differ from those with an outsider service focus on the perceived importance of top management visibility, when controlling for the effects of job satisfaction, commitment, attraction, value similarity and role ambiguity.*

Hypothesis 2: *Professionals with direct customer contact will differ from those without customer contact on the perceived importance of top management visibility, when controlling for the effects of job satisfaction, commitment, attraction, value similarity and role ambiguity.*

Methods

Study Sample: Data were collected from 388 professional employees of a Midwestern insurance company. The group of professionals were a subset of 1,015 employees who responded to a questionnaire administered company wide. The 627 respondents excluded from this study were non-professional (e.g., hourly and clerical) employees. Exclusive use of professional employees was deemed appropriate given their greater likelihood of reliance on and exposure to top managers. It was felt that few hourly personnel had significant contact with top management in this firm.

The average participant in the study is a 38 year old male who has been with the company for 9 years. This company has been in existence for over fifty years and is small enough that all professional employees knew who the top managers were and had at least some contact with them. The professional employees sampled all occupy positions of responsibility throughout the various divisions and levels of the organization.

Insider versus Outsider Service Focus: The respondents were divided into subgroups for purposes of analysis on the basis of their service focus. In this firm, professionals are grouped into divisions that operate exclusively in the field with customers, and those that operate in the corporate headquarters in staff or support functions. The group of employees who are oriented to the outside (i.e., customer) include both field agency and claims personnel. Insiders are employees (e.g., underwriters) who perform internal administrative functions and provide support to field personnel.

Customer Contact: The sample of professionals was also divided into groups according to contact with customers. Two groups were specified: one group containing professionals who have direct contact with customers in the performance of their jobs, and another group comprised of professionals who do not have direct contact.

Importance of Top Manager Visibility: A scale was developed to measure the degree to which respondents assign importance to top management visibility in and around the workplace. This scale is comprised of four items: "It is important for executives to be seen around the office," "I don't care whether or not executives are in the building (reverse coded)," "Whether executives are in or out of the office is of little importance (reverse coded)," "Executives should spend most of their time physically present in their company's headquarters." The term executives rather than top managers was used in this scale because in this study site, professionals referred to the members of top management as executives. Using a 7- point Likert type format, respondents indicated the degree to which they agree or disagree with each scale item. An internal consistency coefficient of reliability (Cronbach alpha) of .66 was found for this scale. Given the

exploratory nature of this visibility scale, a reliability of .66 is considered adequate, but requires caution in drawing inferences (Winer, 1971).

Study Covariates: Potentially confounding attitudinal variables were measured in this study in order to control for their effects and thereby provide a stronger test of the study hypotheses. *Job satisfaction* was measured using Brayfield and Rothe's (1951) 18-item global measure of satisfaction. This measure has been used in numerous studies and has been found to be reliable and valid (Price and Mueller, 1986). *Attraction to Top Managers* was measured using a scale derived from Byrne and Nelson's (1965) Interpersonal Judgement Scale. This measure asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements of liking toward the top managers. Identification with and involvement in the organization was assessed using the 15-item *Organizational Commitment Scale* (Porter et al., 1974). The degree of similarity between respondents and top managers on *organizational values* was assessed using a 20-item scale developed by Enz (1986). This scale has proved to be reliable in other studies and provided a Cronbach alpha of .91 for this study. Finally, *role ambiguity* was measured using the six items taken from Rizzo et al. (1970) and used by Schuler et al. (1977). This scale captures the degree to which role expectations are not clear. The greater the ambiguity the more uncertain the respondent is concerning the outcomes of role performance.

Results

Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities (Cronbach alpha) and Pearson product-moment correlations for all the study variables. The importance of top manager visibility was significantly related to only two of the five covariates—job satisfaction ($r = -.14$) and role ambiguity ($r = .13$). The positive correlation between role ambiguity and the importance of top management visibility suggests that those who are uncertain about role performance attach greater importance to seeing top managers, perhaps because they do not know what behaviors or actions are important to the firm.

Insider versus Outsider Focus: Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), presented in Table 2, was performed to compare differences between professionals with an insider versus outsider service focus on the degree of perceived importance of top management visibility. This analysis controlled for the effects of the covariates: job satisfaction, attraction, commitment, value similarity, and role ambiguity. The five covariates noted were included in these analyses because of their possible extraneous or confounding influences on the importance of top management visibility.

The findings of the ANCOVA indicate that when the potentially

TABLE 1
Correlations Among Variables
(N = 388)

VARIABLES	RELIABILITIES	MEANS	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Importance of Top Manager Visibility	.66	14.3	5.1					
2. Job Satisfaction	.83	95.2	14.2	-.14**				
3. Attraction	.83	11.1	2.9	.03	.54***			
4. Commitment	.87	79.4	14.5	-.06	.72***	.66***		
5. Value Similarity	.91	108.6	19.9	-.04	.37***	.51***	.57***	
6. Role Ambiguity	.79	14.0	5.9	.13**	-.46***	-.36***	-.50***	-.40***

** p < .01
*** p < .001

TABLE 2
Analysis of Covariance
Importance of Top Management Visibility By Inside versus Outside Service Focus

Sources	df	MS	F
Covariants			
Job Satisfaction	1	193.5	8.5**
Attraction	1	140.9	6.2**
Commitment	1	11.3	.5
Value Similarity	1	4.9	.2
Role Ambiguity	1	90.5	4.0*
Main Effect			
Inside/Outside Focus	1	844.6	37.3***
Error	382	219.5	

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

confounding effects of the five covariates are controlled, there remains a significant main effect for importance of top management visibility. These results support the first hypothesis and indicate that professionals with an insider focus differ from those with an outsider focus on the importance they attach to top management visibility. Examination of group means indicates that respondents with an insider focus assigned greater importance to top management visibility ($x = 17.1$) than did their counterparts who have an outsider focus ($x = 13.3$). The central score for the top management visibility scale is 16. Therefore the differences in group means are not only statistically significant, but also reveal that the insider focus group considers top management visibility to be important, but the outsider focus group considers top management visibility to be unimportant.

Customer Contact: A second AN-COVA (see Table 3) examines the

TABLE 3
Analysis of Covariance
Importance of Top Management Visibility By Customer Contact

Sources	df	MS	F
Covariants			
Job Satisfaction	1	187.0	8.0**
Attraction	1	154.3	6.6*
Commitment	1	11.9	.5
Value Similarity	1	11.0	.5
Role Ambiguity	1	69.7	3.0
Main Effect			
Customer Contact	1	396.8	16.9***
Error	380	23.6	

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

importance of top management visibility for groups of professionals who experience customer contact in their work versus those who do not experience customer contact. Supporting the second hypothesis, the analysis indicates that professionals differ significantly on the importance of top management visibility depending on whether they have customer contact, even when controlling for potential confounding attitudinal variables. Professionals with customer contact do not consider top management visibility to be as important ($x = 13.7$) as do employees without customer interaction ($x = 16.9$). In view of the top management importance scale center score of 16, these differences in group means are not only statistically significant, but also reveal that the no customer contact group considers top management visibility to be important, but the customer contact group considers top management visibility not to be important.

Taken together, the results indicate that service focus (insider versus outsider) and customer contact significantly influence the degree to which service professionals consider top management visibility to be important. The study hypotheses are supported. Furthermore, correlation analysis indicates that the importance of top management visibility is directly related to the degree of role ambiguity that professionals experience in their work.

Discussion

The results of this research provide support for the contention that service professionals differ in their perceptions of top management visibility as a function of service focus and customer contact. The primary contribution of the present study is the introduction of the role and importance of top management visibility for service-based professionals. The organizational culture and leadership literatures have emphasized the critical role that top managers perform in conveying corporate values to organization members (Clark, 1972; Conger, 1991; Hambrick and Brandon, 1988; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Pettigrew, 1979; Robbins and Duncan, 1988; Schein, 1983, 1985; Tichy and Devanna, 1986), but the question of how important top management visibility—the foundation of symbolic management—is to employees has not been explored. The findings of this study show that employees differ in the degree of importance they assign to top management visibility and that, among service professionals, service foci and customer contact exert important effects on these perceptions.

Top management visibility is most important for those employees closely tied to the organization's internal culture. These employees search for cultural cues or messages from top managers. Without the visibility of the top managers as models, they can experience uncertainty about their roles and performance. In contrast, the outsider (customer service) focus of field professionals, usually combined with customer contact, place these employees in a different work culture with different reinforcers. These employees seem to derive reinforcements and role guidance from customer demands and feedback, thus mitigating the need for top managers to be present as role models and reinforcing agents.

The present study provides a starting point for further investigation of top management visibility by demonstrating that the importance of top management visibility differs by the presence of customer contact and insider versus outsider service focus. Additional research is necessary to explain why these factors are related to top management visibility. The results of this study point to the nature of the service encounter (service to outsiders as compared to service to insiders) as one potentially

rich source of clues for further study of top management visibility. Another interesting avenue for future study of top management visibility involves the symbolic role of top managers in establishing and maintaining organizational culture. The findings of this study suggest the intriguing possibility that a strong leadership role in the development and delivery of organizational culture is necessary only for employees who do not receive feedback from or have exposure to external constituencies.

This study is exploratory in nature and relies on observations from a single organization. Therefore, implications for management practice must be tempered with an appropriate degree of caution. However, the results clearly support the contention that there are populations of employees who rely on top management for role clarification. This study strongly suggests that top managers perform a particularly important role clarification function for service professionals who do not have the opportunity to interact with customers and/or have an insider service focus. It is important for top managers to devote time to being physically visible for these employees.

However, the results of this study also suggest that top managers should be selective in exercising visibility. Top management visibility is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Not all employees consider the visibility of top managers to be important. For these employees, the time and effort expended by top managers to be physically visible is neither appreciated or beneficial. Professionals who interact with customers, or have an outsider service focus, seem to derive sufficient role clarity from the nature of their work. In effect, the nature of the task—working with or focusing on the customer—seems to serve as a substitute for leadership.

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