

Leading on Land and Sea: Competencies and Context

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to identify the competencies hospitality unit leaders perceived to be most critical for career development, and to determine whether perceptions of the importance of various skills and attributes/abilities varied when leaders worked in different organizational contexts. Leaders from two hospitality segments, land-based hotels and ocean-based cruise ships, participated in the study. Findings indicated notable differences between the two samples on a number of items.

A background of relevant research on hospitality leadership competencies is provided. Contextual variables are examined as they contribute to better understanding differences in perceived competency requirements between land-based and ship-based leaders. Four contextual dimensions (staff composition, task requirements, organizational structure, and the external environment) are explored. A conceptual model is presented that illustrates the posited influence of organizational context on hotel and ship leadership competencies as they impact both selection processes and development activities.

Results of this opinion-based study suggest that, while senior hotel and ship practitioners share a need for certain core competencies (positive attitude and effective listening), organizational context likely influences the relative importance of specific skills and attributes/abilities required for effective leadership in each industry segment. Findings support previous research and have implications for educators, practitioners, and researchers.

*Keywords:* leader, competencies, cruise, management development, selection

## **Leading on land and sea: Competencies and context**

### **Introduction**

Service organizations are characterized by particularly high levels of change and uncertainty. This can be attributed to the need for responsiveness to such factors as unanticipated customer demands, staffing requirements, weather and natural disasters, to name a few (Henderson, 2005; Iverson, 2000; Kennedy and Melton, 2005; Kwortnik, 2005). Hospitality leaders are challenged to address issues of increasing diversity, to satisfy well-informed and demanding customers, and to implement policies and practices (Brownell, 2005; Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Dess and Picken, 2000).

Identifying and developing managerial talent able to assume hospitality leadership positions in this dynamic environment provides a powerful competitive advantage. In a growing and increasingly complex industry, senior leadership matters. Selecting individuals with the “right stuff” and developing middle-level managers into high performing unit leaders are among the most pressing challenges facing hospitality organizations today (Agut et al., 2003; Brownell, 2006; Enz, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to identify the most critical competencies for career development as perceived by hospitality unit leaders, and to determine whether leaders’ perceptions varied from one organizational context to another. Findings, then, would provide useful direction to educators and industry executives seeking to select and prepare future hospitality leaders by identifying the competencies most directly related to high performance. Results of the study would similarly add to the growing body of work in leadership development

and our understanding of the role organizational context plays in shaping leadership requirements.

This paper unfolds in the following manner. First, a review of relevant literature is provided. Beginning with an overview of studies that have identified general leadership competencies, our review then focuses on a stream of related research that has examined the role of organizational context as it affects these requirements. Previous studies that identify the competencies believed to be most essential to hospitality leadership are briefly examined.

This review is followed by a discussion of the frameworks that have proven useful in examining contextual dimensions in organizations. While it appears that substantial attention has been focused on distinguishing hospitality from more generic leadership needs, fewer researchers have explored the impact of different hospitality environments on leadership competency requirements. None have examined the unique aspects of the cruise context. A case is then made for describing competencies in specific rather than broad terms; for the purpose of comparisons in this study, as either skills (learned behaviors) or attributes/abilities (personal characteristics). A conceptual model is presented that further clarifies the posited influence of context on leadership competencies and subsequent selection and development activities.

The study is then described and findings are presented and interpreted. A discussion of career development in the hospitality industry follows. A second model illustrates the respective roles of development (skills-based) and selection (attributes/abilities) in growing leadership talent in each of the two organizational contexts.

### **Literature Review**

A growing research stream explores the premise that effective leaders possess certain core competencies that contribute to their high performance (Adair, 1983; Bingham, 2005;

Christou, 2002; Conger and Ready, 2004; Garavan and McGuire, 2001; Hayes et al., 2000; Jokinen, 2005; Mansfield, 1996; Viitala, 2005). For our purposes, a competency is defined as a skill or personal attribute/ability that is required to be effective on the job—that is critical to achieving targeted outcomes. We distinguish leaders as those individuals holding unit-level positions with responsibility for achieving the organization's goals.

While numerous approaches have been taken to examining leadership effectiveness (Goleman, 2000; Knutson et al., 2002; Yukl, 1994), a competency-based perspective seemed particularly fruitful. Competency-based approaches have been applied successfully to a range of selection, training, and performance management contexts (Athey and Orth, 1999; Kochanski and Ruse, 1996; McEvoy et al., 2005). In spite of several limitations inherent in the approach itself, such as perceptual differences among observers and the potential to overlook important features not captured by competency language, specifying essential leadership requirements in competency terms was deemed a productive and appropriate approach, particularly in providing direction to those interested in leadership development (Boyatzis et al., 2002; Conger and Ready, 2004; Lawson and Limbrick, 1996).

If we examine studies that focus on identifying key leadership competencies, we find the literature is flooded with typologies and lists of various skills and attributes/abilities (Antonacopoulou and Fitzgerald, 1996; Bass, 1981; Cary and Timmons, 1988; Drucker, 1998; Fiedler, 1996; Goleman, 1998, 2000; Palmer et al., 2001; Reinsch and Shelby, 1997; Sternberg, 1997; Weiss, 1999). Abraham et al. (2001), for instance, report that effective leaders possess skills that include communication, teambuilding, problem-solving, and decision-making. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) added initiative, intelligence, and knowledge of the business. Topping (1997) developed a comprehensive list, including confidence, trust, teamwork,

communication, problem-solving ability, and a desire to develop others. Ireland and Hitt (1999) examined successful practices and concluded that flexibility, strategic thinking, and teamwork were central to managerial effectiveness while others suggest that creativity (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall, 1999) and integrity (Earle, 1996) are primary factors.

As the above examples illustrate, numerous researchers have come to independent conclusions regarding the requirements for effective leadership. Several decades of research, however, have failed to identify one essential set of core skills or attributes/abilities that ensure success in all contexts. Given this situation, a related stream of research suggests that the relative importance of various skills and personal attributes/abilities is dependent upon the nature of the specific environment in which behavior occurs (Agut and Grau, 2002; Church and Waclawski, 1998; Griffin et al., 2001; Harris and Baron, 2004; Kay and Russette, 2000). As Bratton et al. (2005) note, context often has considerable power in shaping leader behavior. Effective leaders, then, might productively be viewed as individuals who possess the right combination of skills and personal attributes/abilities for the particular environment in which they work.

Distinguishing the unique requirements of leaders in hospitality environments has been one fruitful research pursuit.

### **Skills and attributes/abilities for hospitality leadership effectiveness**

Aspects of the particular setting serve to constrain or provide opportunities for particular behaviors and activities, and therefore have a substantial impact on the range of options available (Johns, 2001). From this perspective, leadership effectiveness depends upon an individual's "fit" with the demands of the particular situation in which he or she operates (Agut et al., 2003; Barge, 1994; Day, 2001; McKenna, 2002; Stuart and Lindsay, 1997). The individual's skills and personal attributes/abilities need to match the organization's opportunities and requirements—

demonstrating what Noordegraaf and Stewart (2000) refer to as the contextualization of leadership behavior.

Not surprisingly, the leadership needs in service environments have been distinguished from those in other types of work organizations. A stream of studies focuses specifically on the competencies required of managers in the hospitality industry (Breiter and Clements, 1996; Christou, 2002; Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Emenheiser et al., 1998; Greger and Withiam, 1991; Kriegl, 2000). For instance, Tracey and Hinkin (1994), conclude that effective communication is particularly critical in service environments as managers gain commitment and align employee's perspectives so that standards of service excellence can be defined and met. Other studies have examined competency requirements in such industry segments as catering firms and airlines (Brownell and Reynolds, 2000; Wilson et al., 2000), hotels and restaurants (Kay and Moncarz, 2004; Okeiyi et al., 1994), and clubs (Perdue et al., 2002).

Most consistent among research findings that pertain to the competencies required in hospitality environments is the perceived need for interpersonal skills. This competency cluster was identified as important for tourism managers (Breiter and Clements, 1996), recent hotel graduates working as management trainees (Tas et al., 1996), catering managers (Wilson et al., 2000), and hotel managers (Christou, 2002), to name a few.

The problem with accepting the broad category of "interpersonal" or "human relations" skills, however, is that this cluster encompasses a wide array of more specific skills and attributes/abilities. For instance, we might place the skills of listening, providing feedback, and managing conflict under "interpersonal" competence. Attributes/abilities such as flexibility or a positive attitude also contribute to "effective communication". It is on the level of these more clearly specified skills and attributes/abilities that differences in the position requirements of

hospitality leaders in different organizational contexts are most likely to be recognized, and it is only at this level of specificity that competencies provide meaningful direction to those interested in leadership development.

## **2.2 Frameworks for understanding contextual variables**

A number of frameworks have been proposed for conceptualizing and categorizing the key contextual variables that impact leadership behavior (Burke, 1965; Crowe et al., 1972; Yukl and Carrier, 1986). Yukl (1994), in his summary of leadership research, presents one of the most widely accepted frameworks for understanding situational determinants of performance. Our discussion of survey results later in this paper focuses on four of these dimensions, two at the macro level and two at the micro level. While these dimensions are necessarily simplified for our purposes, they provide a fruitful backdrop for first examining the cruise environment and then for our later discussion of survey findings.

Variables that influence managerial demands at the macro level include elements of the organization itself such as the structure and size of the unit. Also included in this dimension are such critical factors as scope of authority, traditions, and the nature of current practices and systems. The second macro dimension is the external environment which involves the economic climate and external forces, such as weather, which often are unpredictable.

While macro variables provide a useful perspective, our discussion of survey results also addresses two micro dimensions. First, staff characteristics—age, culture, education, and so forth—have an impact on leadership practices. Second, characteristics of the task, or the nature of the work itself, also influence leadership requirements. Task complexity, difficulty, variability, and uncertainty all affect the relative importance of various skills and attributes/abilities as leaders strive to accomplish organizational goals.



In addition to the four dimensions described by Yukl, Stewart's (1982) stream of qualitative studies focuses on identifying what managers and leaders in various organizational contexts really do. Her CCD model, in which she distinguishes between choices, constraints, and demands, has been widely applied to better understand leadership behavior as it is influenced by the particular environment. Stewart recognized that there were requirements of the job that anyone holding the position would need to fulfill, and called these "demands." She also observed that there were "constraints" that limited what could be accomplished within a particular context. The concepts of "demand" and "constraint" are also useful in our later discussion of survey findings.

### **The cruise ship context**

We have seen that hospitality leaders can be distinguished by their focus on the dynamics of a people-centered business. While there are similarities among the leadership competency requirements of various industry segments in this regard, we are interested in exploring whether the shipboard environment is distinctive in ways that affect the degree to which various skills and attributes/ abilities are valued. The perceptions of ship-based cruise directors' competency requirements, then, can be compared to those of land-based hotel leaders who work in a substantially different environment.

### ***Macro dimensions of cruise context***

The uniqueness of cruise leadership comes in large measure from the ship's physical isolation, a constraint which puts an additional burden on personnel to be resourceful as they problem solve and manage crises (Biehn, 2006; Testa, 2002; Tracy, 2000). Unanticipated, weather-related problems are frequent and the requirements and regulations of each port of call add to the uncertainty.

Organizations can also be seen as taking up varying amounts of employees' time and interests. Goffman (1961) called this phenomenon an "encompassing tendency," and used the term "total institution" to describe those work environments that encompassed employees to the extent that their social interactions with the outside world were limited. A cruise ship clearly fits this definition as employees' activities are managed over long periods of time in a restricted space.

New and increasingly stringent safety and security regulations placed on an already highly regulated industry, and the efforts to meet mandatory guidelines, has created additional stress for a staff entrusted with the well-being of thousands of passengers. Safety concerns also create the need for more formal, militaristic organizational structures where roles and lines of authority are clearly defined. At this level, Stewart's (1982) demands and constraints become useful tools of analysis.

### *Micro dimensions of cruise context*

Additional variables, unique to working on a ship, result from features of the two micro dimensions—the nature of the staff and the job requirements. The cruise industry employs a highly international and diverse workforce, with as many as forty cultures represented on one of the larger ships. Living for extended periods in close quarters with coworkers who may not share the same attitudes, values, and experiences is likely to impact the nature of interpersonal relationships. While English is the most frequently spoken language on board, a large percent of the staff are speakers of English as a second language. This situation has implications for both micro and macro dimensions.

Shipboard personnel (including the Cruise Director) have multi-month contracts, often working 12 or more hours a day, seven days a week, for six or more months at a time. Adding to

an already stressful situation, staff members must also be “on” whenever they are accessible to passengers; the only way to engage in non-work related behavior is to disappear into the lower levels of the ship. The additional burden of providing emotional labor—the term Hochschild (1983) proposed to describe work where employees are expected to express certain emotions as part of their job—nearly 24 h a day, seven days a week, potentially increases fatigue and stress still further (Morris and Feldman, 1997).

The fact that line staff are seldom guaranteed a position with the same ship from one contract to the next (in addition to the “command and control” nature of maritime relationships) influences managers’ ability to build teams, develop employees, and foster long-term commitments. Even at the middle management levels, team membership is affected by lengthy breaks and the possibility of returning to a different ship after time away.

The hospitality industry is projected to continue its growth well into the next decade (Barnett, 2005; Kolia, 2006); the ever-expanding cruise presence in waters throughout the world has made this industry segment a vital concern for professionals and educators alike. Consequently, there is an increasing need to understand how best to prepare the leaders who will guide these organizations in an increasingly competitive environment.

As noted earlier, while previous research has addressed the competencies required for leadership effectiveness in clubs, hotels, casinos, restaurants, and other segments (Brownell, 2004; Choi, 2006; Enz, 2003; Perdue et al., 2002), virtually no studies have focused specifically on the cruise industry as an organizational context. The unique aspects of the shipboard environment—Stewart’s demands and constraints—suggest that skills and attributes/abilities may be distinctive. A study that examines perceived success factors for unit leaders in the cruise industry, and determines if they are different from the experiences of their land-based

counterparts, would therefore seem valuable. Findings would be expected to provide useful information to educators as well as industry practitioners as they strive to select and develop leadership talent. This study also contributes to the stream of research that explores whether and how organizational context influences the relative importance of both leadership skills and personal attributes/abilities. A model is provided (Fig. 1) to clarify and further illustrate these relationships and to suggest their impact on selection and development activities.

## **Methodology**

### **Research questions**

Given the goals described above, this study seeks answers to the following three questions:

- (1) What skills and personal attributes/abilities are perceived by hotel General Managers as most essential for career development in their workplace context?
- (2) What skills and personal attributes/abilities are perceived by Cruise Directors as most essential for career development in their workplace context?
- (3) Do the competencies (skills and attributes/abilities) perceived as important for career development differ between unit leaders in these two hospitality industry segments?

Further examination may then determine whether contextual factors help to explain any differences between hotel and cruise unit leaders in their perceptions of the most critical position requirements. Such information will prove useful in identifying middle-level managers' development needs and in designing strategies for selecting and assessing future leadership talent. Rather than assuming all hospitality leaders require the same broad and generic competencies of "interpersonal skills" or "communication", educators, human resource

professionals, and hospitality leaders themselves will benefit from identifying and addressing the specific skills and attributes/abilities that contribute to leadership success.

### **3.2 Survey Development**

An extensive literature review revealed a range of competencies generated by previous studies (between 1995 and 2003) and thought to be important for leadership effectiveness at the unit level. The author and two trained assistants conducted a content analysis of these 57 items. They first sorted competencies into two categories, either specific skills or attributes/abilities, and then independently identified items that were redundant or ambiguous. When highly similar or overlapping items were dropped, a list of 43 skills and personal attributes/abilities remained.

A group of twelve full-service hotel General Managers working in the US, several with multi-unit responsibilities, was on campus attending an executive development program. An invitation to assist with this research project was distributed to all twelve participants and, subsequently, a convenience focus group of four unit-level managers and one regional-level hospitality manager was formed. These volunteers were asked to review the list of 43 items and then to briefly discuss and vote on each item in turn, verifying its clarity and appropriateness. Seven items were deemed confusing, too general, or less relevant by at least four of the five participants. A survey instrument was subsequently created that included the 36 remaining items.

Part One of the survey presented hotel General Managers and Cruise Directors with 5-point Likert scales and asked them to indicate the degree to which they believed each item contributed to career development in their industry segment. Items were divided into two categories, skills (Section 1) and personal attributes/abilities (Section 2), for clarity. Part Two of the survey requested demographic information.

**Sample**

Eight hotel companies, selected from JD Power and Associates 2002 Domestic Hotel Guest Satisfaction Listing, were selected to represent the full-service luxury hotel and resort industry segment in North America. Seven of these companies accepted the invitation to participate in the study. A corporate representative provided General Manager addresses for each hotel company, and surveys were sent directly to all 187 General Managers whose names were provided. One hundred eleven useable surveys were returned in self-addressed envelopes for a highly acceptable response rate of 59.3% (Fink and Kosecoff, 1985; Sekaran, 1984).

Eleven cruise lines, all with corporate offices in the United States, were invited to participate in this project. Ten lines accepted the invitation. In each case, survey packets were sent to the Vice President of Operations (or the corporate executive with the closest position description) for the respective line and this individual, or a company representative, forwarded questionnaires to every Hotel Director. Altogether, 118 hard copy surveys were distributed. Completed survey instruments were then returned to the researcher in self-addressed envelopes. Seventy-seven useable surveys were completed for a response rate of 65.2%. While the title of Hotel Director is used most frequently to distinguish a cruise ship's hotel-side unit leader, to avoid confusion with the hotel comparison group, the title of Cruise Director or simply Director will be used throughout this paper.

**Results of Study****Demographics**

Looking first at the General Manager profile, we find that men constituted slightly over 90% of the sample. In this group, approximately 11% were single and 6% were separated or divorced; the remaining 83% were married. With regard to experience in the industry, all

respondents had worked in hotels for over 10 years. The vast majority, nearly 75%, had worked in the industry for over 20 years. While approximately 32% of respondents had held their position 5 years or less, 43% had been a General Manager for more than 10 years. English was the native language for 76% of those surveyed.

The profile of Directors was similarly male dominated, with 73 of the 77 respondents, or 95%, being male. The same number of Directors (35) was married as was single; the rest were separated or divorced. With regard to years of experience, over 50% of respondents had worked in the cruise industry for between 10 and 20 years. Approximately, 25% indicated that they had worked in the industry for over twenty years, and slightly fewer (22%) had worked for less than 10 years.

Turning to experience as a Director, nearly 50% of respondents had been in their positions five years or less, while just over 30% had been in their jobs between 6 and 10 years. The remaining 20% reported that they had been Director for over 10 years. English was the native language for 38% of these Directors. Table 1 compares the hotel and cruise demographic information on a number of dimensions.

### **Importance of skills to career development**

Section 1 presented respondents with 5-point Likert scales and asked them to rate 16 skills in terms of how critical each was to their career development and advancement to their current position. The scale was anchored with 1 representing “unimportant” and 5 indicating the item was “extremely important.”

Two items topped the General Managers’ list with mean scores over 4.50. Leading teams was rated first with a mean of 4.73, and effective listening was rated second with a mean of 4.62. Three additional skills clustered just below these two; coaching employees (mean 4.41),

providing feedback (mean 4.33), and managing conflict (mean 4.31). Less important, but still receiving a mean rating of over 4.0 on a 5 point scale, were managing crises (4.18), managing time (4.08), and appraising employees (4.01).

At the other end of the spectrum, receiving the lowest mean ratings in Section 1, were using technology (mean 3.21), preparing reports (mean 3.44), and writing memos and letters (mean 3.49). Means for presentational speaking and intercultural communication were also below 4.0.

Section 2 addressed the extent to which General Managers believed each of the personal attributes/abilities contributed to their advancement. General Managers attributed a large portion of their success to hard work (mean 4.65), followed by their trustworthiness (mean 4.59). Slightly less important, but still with mean ratings over 4.50, were integrity (mean 4.55) and a positive attitude (mean 4.52).

Examining the low end of the scale, it appears that General Managers believe gender (mean 1.87) and lucky breaks (mean 2.67) had relatively little impact on their career development. Other traits that were perceived as less important to their advancement included educational background (mean 3.09), a global perspective (mean 3.36), and mentoring (mean 3.55). A summary ranking of General Managers' responses to items in these two sections appears in Table 2.

When Cruise Directors' responses to the same set of questions are examined (Table 2), we find that four items cluster at the top. The highest rated skills include intercultural communication (mean 4.74), effective listening (mean 4.73), managing conflict (mean 4.71), and managing crises (mean 4.70). Leading teams (mean 4.65) and coaching employees (mean 4.55) also demonstrated mean scores above 4.50.



Skills that were perceived by Directors as less important to their career development included presentational speaking (mean 3.52), negotiating (mean 3.53), and various forms of written communication (both writing memos and letters as well as preparing reports had mean scores of 3.61). Using technology also received one of the lowest ratings with a mean of 3.65.

In responding to the items in Section 2, which addressed the importance of personal attributes/abilities, Directors agreed that a positive attitude (mean 4.70) and flexibility (mean 4.69) were most critical. Beyond these characteristics, Directors attributed their career development to their trustworthiness (mean 4.62), problem-solving ability (mean 4.61), and integrity (mean 4.58).

At the other end of the scale, Directors rated gender (mean 2.21) and lucky breaks (mean 2.47) as among the least important success factors. Mentoring (mean 3.56) and educational background (mean 3.64) were also given slightly lower ratings than other items.

### **Hotel-cruise comparison of mean scores**

When a two-tailed z-test was conducted to compare mean scores between the two groups, General Managers and Cruise Directors, a number of significant differences were found (Table 3). With regard to the skills presented in Section 1, differences at  $p < 0.0001$  were established for four items. Included in this group were managing conflict, intercultural communication, managing diversity, and managing crises. In all cases, items were rated as more important by Cruise Directors than by General Managers. Other items from Section 1 on which there was a significant difference between the two groups at  $p < 0.01$  included use of technology, appraising employees, and time management. Once again, Directors perceived these items as more important to their career development than did General Managers.

Significant differences also were found between Directors and General Managers with regard to their ratings of the personal attributes/abilities required for their career advancement. Differences at the ( $p < 0.001$ ) level were found in the greater importance Directors placed on two items, flexibility and educational background. Other significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ) were revealed in the degree to which the two groups perceived that problem solving and knowledge of their industry were required for advancement to senior management at the unit level.

Of particular note is the fact that, as the different scores in Table 2 illustrate, Cruise Directors rated all but seven items (three skills and four attributes/abilities) as more important than did their General Manager counterparts.

### **Discussion: Context and Careerevelopment**

A rank ordering of the top six survey items by mean ratings, when skills and personal attributes/abilities are combined, reveals marked differences between the General Manager and Cruise Director groups (Table 4). It may be useful, therefore, to suggest how the perceived differences in the relative importance of various skills and personal attributes/abilities might be attributed to the distinctive aspects of the work environment. Such a discussion may stimulate further inquiry into how context influences job demands and subsequently determines the set of specific competencies required for effectiveness.

As was discussed in the earlier literature review, a Cruise Director operates in an organizational setting characterized by features that are substantially different from those confronted by his or her land-based counterpart. These differences in organizational context can be appreciated by examining the four contextual dimensions presented in our earlier discussion that now can be used as a framework in examining the need for leadership competencies that address specific job requirements.

**Nature of Staff: the composition and characteristics of the workforce**

If we return to two of the items on which the most significant differences occurred, intercultural communication and managing diversity, it seems reasonable to conclude that the more highly diverse shipboard staff contributed to Directors' higher ratings on these items. While hospitality workforces are traditionally multicultural (Iverson, 2000; Lee and Chon, 2000), with only a few exceptions the cruise industry recruits virtually all of its employees from countries other than the United States, bringing together a mix of nationalities to serve predominantly American passengers. It is not unusual to have employees from over forty different countries on one of the larger ships.

It may also be worth noting that English is the native language of only about one third of the Cruise Directors. On the other hand, over 75% of the hotel General Managers indicated that English was their first language. If we examine the different scores of the two skills that relate most directly to culture—managing diversity (diff 0.499) and intercultural communication (diff 0.947)—it becomes clear that Cruise Directors have a substantially greater interest in competencies that facilitate understanding among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It seems safe to suggest that non-native English speakers appreciate cultural differences more than their native English speaking colleagues (Gump, 2003; Haberman, 1991; Maxwell and Garrett, 2002).

**Nature of the job: what the incumbent does, job requirements**

Two other of the four items demonstrating mean differences at the ( $p < 0.0001$ ) confidence level, and among those items with the highest means for Cruise Directors, were managing crises and managing conflict. These skills may well be of more consequence to Directors than to General Managers as a result, again, of a highly diverse workforce living and

working in a “total institution” (Goffman, 1961) shipboard experience. Since the Cruise Director is likely to have less opportunity to delegate responsibilities, he or she is also likely to be aware of and directly involved in many of the crises that arise—from a malfunctioning air conditioner to a VIP passenger who is unhappy with her assigned table.

In addition, cruise employees are “on call” seven days a week, 24 h a day. While service environments are known to create stress for employees who are required to provide emotional labor (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Morris and Feldman, 1997), “serving” around-the-clock creates a situation where public and private pressures become blurred (Tracy, 2000). It follows that, in the absence of any extended “down time”, shipboard employees would experience increased instances of conflict both on and off the job.

In addition, the fact that a ship remains isolated for extended periods of time also contributes to a greater need for crisis management skills. Cruise Directors must be more self-sufficient than would be the case if supplies, assistance, and other resources were more readily available. The increased safety and security demands of shipboard staff may also contribute to a more stressful environment. At sea, the ship and its passengers are more vulnerable to a wide range of emergencies, from mechanical failures to illness and purchasing errors. This degree of isolation and uncertainty may also contribute to several other items which were rated significantly higher by Directors than by General Managers, such as flexibility, problem solving, and time management.

### **Nature of the organizational structure; hierarchical vs flatter, team-based designs**

Turning our attention once again to the General Managers’ mean rankings, we find that two skill sets and four personal attributes/abilities were all rated above 4.5 on the 5-point Likert scale. General Managers identified leading teams as the most significant skill influencing their

career development, followed by listening. These skills suggest the participative, communication-based leadership style that facilitates employee empowerment and effective service delivery (Iverson, 2000; Reinsch and Shelby, 1997; Tracey and Hinkin, 1994). Without the hierarchies and inherent shipboard structures that constrain Cruise Directors, General Managers are able more easily to create flatter organizations that allow for more frequent horizontal exchanges and increased teamwork. Listening, which contributes to a service-centered environment (Brownell, 2004), was the only skill that appeared in the top rankings of both General Managers and Directors.

The cruise ship, known for its more militaristic structure and clear lines of authority, command, and control, also helps to explain the higher rating Cruise Directors assigned to managing crises. The greater focus on safety and security requires a high degree of clarity in directions and a well-defined reporting structure (Testa, 2002). The need to work within well-defined time constraints to achieve specified results makes a more participative, team-based approach to decision making less effective.

Interestingly, neither respondent group perceived that competence in the use of technology was particularly important to their effectiveness. In a global hospitality environment where much attention has been given to the use of distance communications—email, videoconferencing, and so forth (O'Connor and Murphy, 2004; Wei et al., 2001)—it is surprising that neither Hotel Managers nor Cruise Directors saw competence in this medium as significantly affecting their career development. It would seem that ships, in particular, depend on technology for their connections to land-based operations and that middle-level managers who understand the power and potential of this medium would be highly valued. Findings did not support this view.

### **Nature of the external environment: threats and degree of environmental uncertainty**

Elements of the external environment affect leadership on land and sea in a variety of ways. While land-based managers are hardly immune to power outages, earthquakes, and other factors beyond their control, Cruise Directors are confronted with unanticipated external dilemmas on a much more regular basis, often with significant consequences for their operations. In addition to constant weather-related threats, port and governmental regulations often have profound implications, causing unanticipated delays and issues of security. As mentioned earlier, the Director's unusually high need for flexibility may be the result of working with finite resources and a high degree of uncertainty.

Finally, when taking a holistic view, it is somewhat surprising that Cruise Directors would find so many of the survey items more important than do their land-based counterparts. Perhaps the immediate, hands-on nature of the cruise environment creates a sense of urgency for leaders who feel directly responsible for all operations. Clearly, as we have discussed, the cruise context is characterized by particularly high instances of unanticipated challenges and crises as an international staff serves passengers with high expectations around the clock.

### **Implications of Findings for Selection and Development**

Identifying and developing middle-level management talent has been one of the primary human resources challenges facing the hospitality industry (Enz, 2003; Gattiker and Larwood, 1990; Human Resources Roundtable, 2005). A recent study sponsored by B.T. Novations (Younger and Roddy, 2000) is among a growing number reporting that the vast majority of US companies are doing too little systematic succession planning. In tight economic times, the question of whether or not to put resources into leadership development initiatives becomes particularly difficult. As the expert respondents in a recent issue of the Harvard Business Review

argue, however, employee development must be a critical managerial priority (Kesner, 2003) if companies are to remain competitive. Organizations that neglect this responsibility will have difficulty meeting future business challenges. What implications do findings from this study have for selection and development activities in the hospitality industry?

Of considerable impact is the finding that less than 10% of each sample was female, with a slightly greater percentage of women working as General Managers than as Cruise Directors. While women are making progress in their career development in a number of hospitality industry segments (Gillian, 1997; Soehanovc et al., 2000), the cruise environment may present unique challenges for women seeking senior level shipboard positions. Undoubtedly, there are cultural considerations when women assume leadership roles in a highly international environment, as their status in many countries prevents them from readily assuming senior leadership positions (Charles and Davies, 2000; Cordano et al., 2002; Linehan and Scullion, 2001). Regardless, this finding is troublesome. In addition, it is of particular note that the predominantly male survey respondents rated gender as among the least important factors in achieving career advancement.

While the absence of women in unit leadership positions is striking, it appears that equal numbers of men and women are now graduating from US hospitality management programs. Tracking studies have consistently shown that attrition among women in the hospitality industry is substantially greater than for men (Knutson and Schmidgall, 1999; Oakley, 2000). Family friendly work policies have been slow to penetrate the hospitality industry (Brownell, 1998; Klenke, 2002; Knutson et al., 2002; Konrad and Mangel, 2000). The cruise segment, in particular, requires employees to spend months at sea and the hardships on families is consequently substantial.

Further evidence that this tension has had a particularly severe impact on the cruise segment is the fact that only 11% of General Managers indicated that they were single compared with 45% of Cruise Directors. This suggests that the cruise lifestyle and requirements make it particularly difficult to balance personal and family needs with work at sea, and that industry employees would be well-served by a comprehensive examination of current policies and procedures to identify how obstacles to achieving work–family balance might be reduced.

While unit-level hospitality practitioners all require a broad array of competencies, we have seen that several important differences emerged between General Managers' and Cruise Directors' perceptions of the relative importance of various skills and attributes/abilities for career advancement in their respective industries. This finding contributes support to Stewart's premise that situational and environmental factors influence what managers do on the job and, subsequently, affect the nature and extent to which specific skills and personal attributes/abilities are required for maximum effectiveness in meeting contextual demands and overcoming contextual constraints. Table 4 presents the six top-ranked position requirements for each of the two unit leader groups. A distinction is made between the categories of skills and personal attributes/ abilities.

The distinction between skills and personal attributes/ abilities has noteworthy implications for professional development. While we assume that most skills can be acquired and improved through a range of training and other educational interventions, personal attributes/ abilities are much more difficult to modify or to develop (Badaracco, 1998; Becker, 2003; Simons, 2002). As respondents assigned considerable significance to a number of personal attributes/abilities, it would seem that selection processes must be tailored to identify individuals who possess the specific competencies that unit leaders believe contribute most significantly to



high performance. The model presented in Fig. 2 distinguishes between skills that can be acquired and improved through training and development efforts, and personal attributes/abilities that are best assessed in the initial admissions or selection process (Brownell, 2006; Raub and Streit, 2006).

Although self-reports have significant limitations, it is encouraging to note that a concern for trustworthiness and integrity rated high among the list of critical competencies for both respondent groups. The impact of a leader's character, a long-neglected dimension that has become of critical importance in today's business environment, cannot be ignored (Sankar, 2003; Simons, 2002; Tubbs and Schultz, 2005). Selecting for these and other "intangible" attributes/abilities, however, is an on-going challenge for both admissions committees in university settings and human resource professionals in the workplace. The fact that these competencies are difficult to identify and assess, however, cannot discourage educators and practitioners from focusing on their importance to leadership effectiveness.

The relative importance of a formal academic education to career success in the hospitality industry also remains a question of some debate (Fowler et al., 2005; Gamble and Messenger, 1990; Nebel et al., 1995). Steed and Schwer (2003), in their examination of the skills required by executive teams, are among those who have concluded that on-the-job training methods are more effective than formal education in helping individuals to develop critical competencies. This is particularly true of skills in the "soft" areas of customer relations and interpersonal communication that are so essential to hospitality professionals. Recent research, however, suggests that the functional business knowledge and skill required of those seeking a "fast track" to senior leadership positions may be most readily acquired in academic programs (Fowler et al., 2005; Harper et al., 2005). This finding is in sharp contrast with the results of the

survey reported here, as both General Managers and Cruise Directors ranked a formal education as among the least important factors influencing effectiveness on the job.

Whether as a component of an academic program or for professional development on the job, consultants and researchers have argued persuasively that over 80% of what managers need to know can only be acquired through experiences in the field (Bennis, 1999; Birchfield, 1998; Conger, 1993; Csoka, 1996; Drucker, 1998; Kesner, 2003; Longenecker and Fink, 2001; Raybould and Wilkins, 2005; Rifkin, 1996). Rather than spending hours in a classroom, today's future leaders develop both key skills and attributes/abilities through a wide range of experiential activities. Organizational experts recognize that knowledge alone does not translate into managerial effectiveness. Consequently, the best business schools are renewing their commitment to provide opportunities for students to experience real world challenges as they demonstrate their mastery of essential leadership competencies (Boyatzis et al., 2002; Raybould and Wilkins, 2005). Internships, case studies, and consulting projects enable students to demonstrate not only skills but important attributes/ abilities as well.

Hospitality educators may be well-served by assessing their current practices and by exploring the ways in which they might partner with professionals in each segment of the industry to achieve the greatest impact on performance. Only when educators have identified the specific competencies that facilitate leadership effectiveness, and developed meaningful strategies to ensure their acquisition, will graduates and their employers perceive the full benefit of an academic education.

In the field, leaders must recognize "teachable moments" (Kesner, 2003, p. 36) that arise on the job, and strive to model the behaviors associated with high performance as they mentor and coach members of their team. New types of developmental procedures, such as performance

appraisals that reward employee development activities and professional growth plans that facilitate continuous learning (Fenwick, 2003), supplement or replace many formal training designs.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has value in providing insights into the ways in which context impacts performance and suggesting future directions for leadership development. In assessing its usefulness, however, several limitations should be noted. First, the list of competencies, while grounded in the findings of recent studies, was selected and sorted on the basis of judgments made by the author and two trained assistants. In addition, the team of hospitality professionals who assisted in finalizing the list was a convenience sample making decisions based on brief instructions from the researcher and their personal experiences and perspectives. Further, the nature of the survey itself is opinion-based; respondents were asked to rate each item according to their estimate of its importance to their career development. Consequently, some degree of bias is inevitable.

While these limitations need to be considered in interpreting findings, the study reported here addresses an important and largely unexplored topic that will become increasingly significant in the years ahead. Results suggest future research directions and have potential value for both educators and practitioners concerned with succession planning and with preparing individuals to be highly effective in their hospitality careers.

### **Conclusion**

What is the value of specifying the skills and attributes/ abilities believed to be the high priority competencies of hospitality leaders? Why is it important to determine whether

differences exist between industry segments? Human capital is undeniably a hospitality organization's most valuable resource and has the potential to provide one of the most sustainable competitive advantages in today's marketplace. Information and insights that contribute to clarifying, assessing, and developing employees' core skills and attributes/abilities will ensure greater consistency and effectiveness in both the selection and development processes.

The results of this study suggest that, while senior leaders share a need for general, broad-based competencies, it is productive to consider the specific organizational context as it influences the relative importance of specific position skills and attributes/abilities. Clearly, additional studies are needed that synthesize and interpret current research and that continue to assess the impact of context on leadership requirements. The results of such research will guide in both selection and succession planning activities. Only when selection and development systems are focused and aligned can hospitality organizations create the deep talent pool from which highly effective future leaders emerge.

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**Table 1.** Demographic information hotel and cruise.

	General managers		Cruise directors	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<i>Time in industry</i>				
(a) Under 5 yrs	0.00	0.00	5.00	0.06
(b) 5–9 yrs	0.00	0.00	12.00	0.16
(c) 10–20 yrs	29.00	0.26	41.00	0.53
(d) Over 20 yrs	82.00	0.74	18.00	0.25
<i>Time in position</i>				
(a) Under 1 yr	6.00	0.06	4.00	0.05
(b) 1–5 yrs	29.00	0.26	33.00	0.43
(c) 6–10 yrs	28.00	0.25	25.00	0.32
(d) Over 10 yrs	48.00	0.43	15.00	0.20
<i>Native language</i>				
(a) English	84.00	0.76	29.00	0.38
(b) All other	27.00	0.24	48.00	0.62
<i>Gender</i>				
(a) Male	101.00	0.91	73.00	0.95
(b) Female	10.00	0.09	4.00	0.05
<i>Marital Status</i>				
(a) Single	12.00	0.11	35.00	0.45
(b) Other	7.00	0.06	7.00	0.10
(c) Married	92.00	0.83	35.00	0.45

Hotel  $N = 111$  and cruise  $N = 77$ .

**Table 2.** Hotel general managers and cruise directors means and difference scores.

Survey item	Hotel rank	Hotel mean	Hotel SD	Cruise rank	Cruise mean	Cruise SD	Diff score
<i>Section #1: skills</i>							
Leading teams	1	4.730	0.521	5	4.649	0.580	0.081
Effective listening	2	4.622	0.523	2	4.727	0.504	-0.105
Coaching employees	3	4.405	0.679	6	4.545	0.597	-0.140
Providing feedback	4	4.333	0.623	10	4.307	0.716	0.026
Managing conflict	5	4.306	0.736	3	4.711	0.561	-0.405
Managing crises	6	4.180	0.876	4	4.701	0.540	-0.521
Time management	7	4.081	0.764	8	4.377	0.744	-0.296
Appraising employees	8	4.009	0.720	9	4.312	0.831	-0.303
Managing diversity	9	3.982	0.863	7	4.481	0.736	-0.499
Conducting meetings	10	3.964	0.713	11	4.130	0.908	-0.166
Negotiating	11	3.833	0.864	15	3.526	1.007	0.307
Intercultural communication	12	3.793	0.964	1	4.740	0.616	-0.947
Presentational speaking	13	3.712	1.178	16	3.519	1.008	0.193
Memos and letters	14	3.486	1.017	13	3.610	0.876	-0.124
Preparing reports	15	3.441	0.849	14	3.610	0.876	-0.169
Using technology	16	3.207	0.843	12	3.649	1.061	-0.442
<i>Section #2: attitudes/abilities</i>							
Hard work	1	4.649	0.533	6	4.545	0.680	0.104
Trustworthiness	2	4.586	0.680	3	4.623	0.650	-0.037
Integrity	3	4.550	0.657	5	4.584	0.636	-0.034
Positive attitude	4	4.523	0.645	1	4.701	0.563	-0.178
Perseverance	5	4.477	0.699	13	4.013	0.872	0.464
Flexibility	6	4.369	0.797	2	4.688	0.494	-0.319
Problem-solving ability	7	4.360	0.629	4	4.610	0.542	-0.250
Confidence	8	4.351	0.613	9	4.442	0.716	-0.091
Decision making ability	9	4.342	0.595	7	4.481	0.700	-0.139
Knowledge of the field	10	4.027	0.803	10	4.364	0.887	-0.337
Strategic planning ability	11	4.000	0.775	15	3.987	1.006	0.013
Persuasive ability	12	3.910	0.793	8	4.455	0.770	-0.545
Personal sacrifice	13	3.901	0.894	11	4.221	0.982	-0.320

Survey item	Hotel rank	Hotel mean	Hotel SD	Cruise rank	Cruise mean	Cruise SD	Diff score
Creativity	14	3.820	0.955	12	4.156	0.828	-0.336
Personality fit	15	3.682	0.938	14	4.013	0.872	-0.331
Mentoring	16	3.550	0.932	18	3.560	1.068	-0.010
Global perspective	17	3.360	0.989	16	3.760	1.149	-0.400
Educational background	18	3.090	0.996	17	3.636	1.099	-0.546
Lucky breaks	19	2.673	0.900	19	2.474	1.026	0.199
Gender	20	1.865	1.049	20	2.213	1.388	-0.348

**Table 3.** Z-test general manager and cruise director means (at 0.01).

Item	$P(Z \leq z)$ two tail	Z	z Critical two-tail
Intercultural communication***	2.22E-16	8.218	2.575
Managing crises***	4.65E-07	5.040	2.575
Managing conflict***	2.1E-05	4.254	2.575
Managing diversity***	3.65E-05	4.128	2.575
<i>Flexibility**</i>	0.0007	3.382	2.575
<i>Educational background**</i>	0.0008	3.345	2.575
Using technology*	0.0022	3.049	2.575
<i>Problem solving ability*</i>	0.0036	2.909	2.575
<i>Knowledge of the field*</i>	0.0078	2.658	2.575
Time management*	0.0080	2.648	2.575
Appraising employees*	0.0095	2.591	2.575

Hotel GM observations= 111 and cruise D observations= 77

Note: Attributes/abilities in italic.

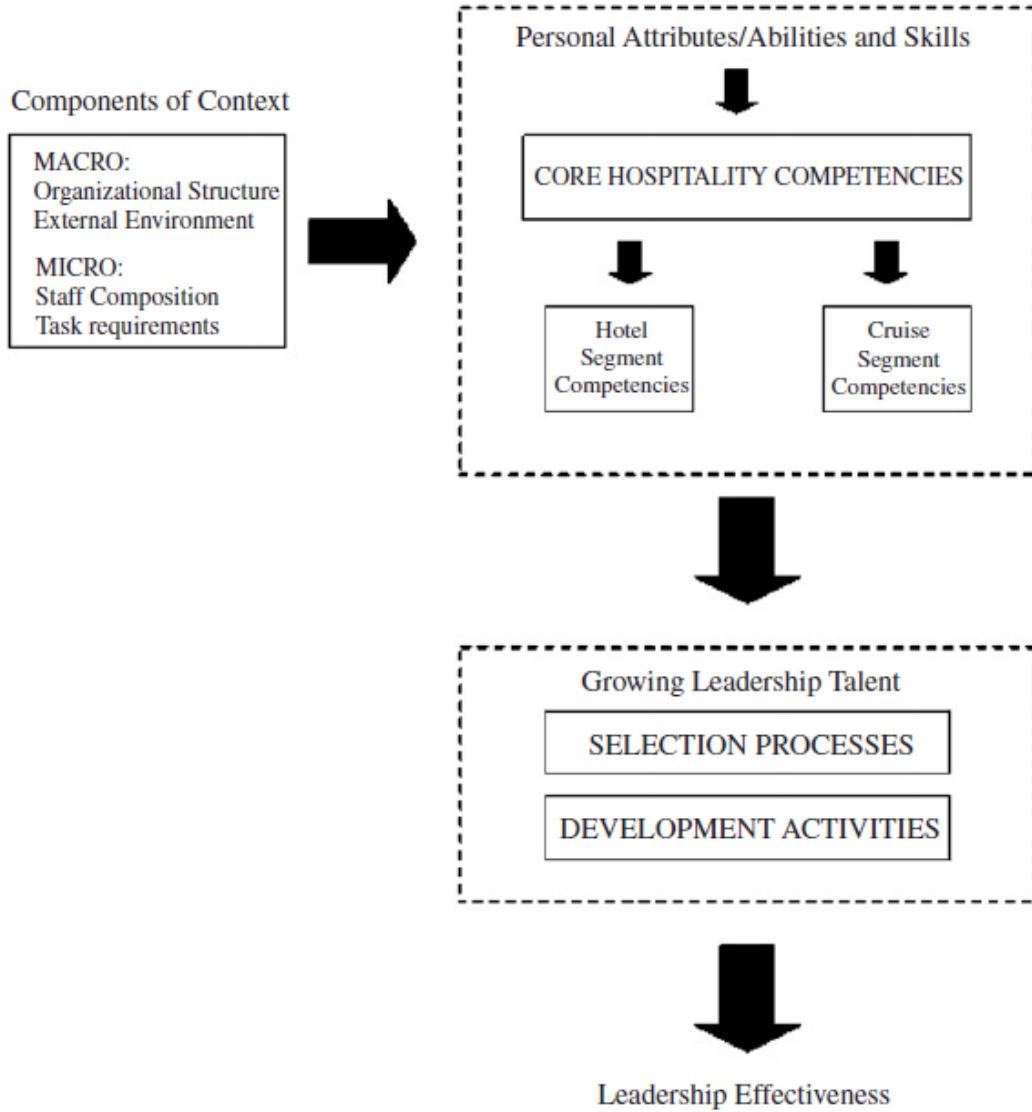
\*\*\*Significant at  $p < 0.0001$ .

\*\*Significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

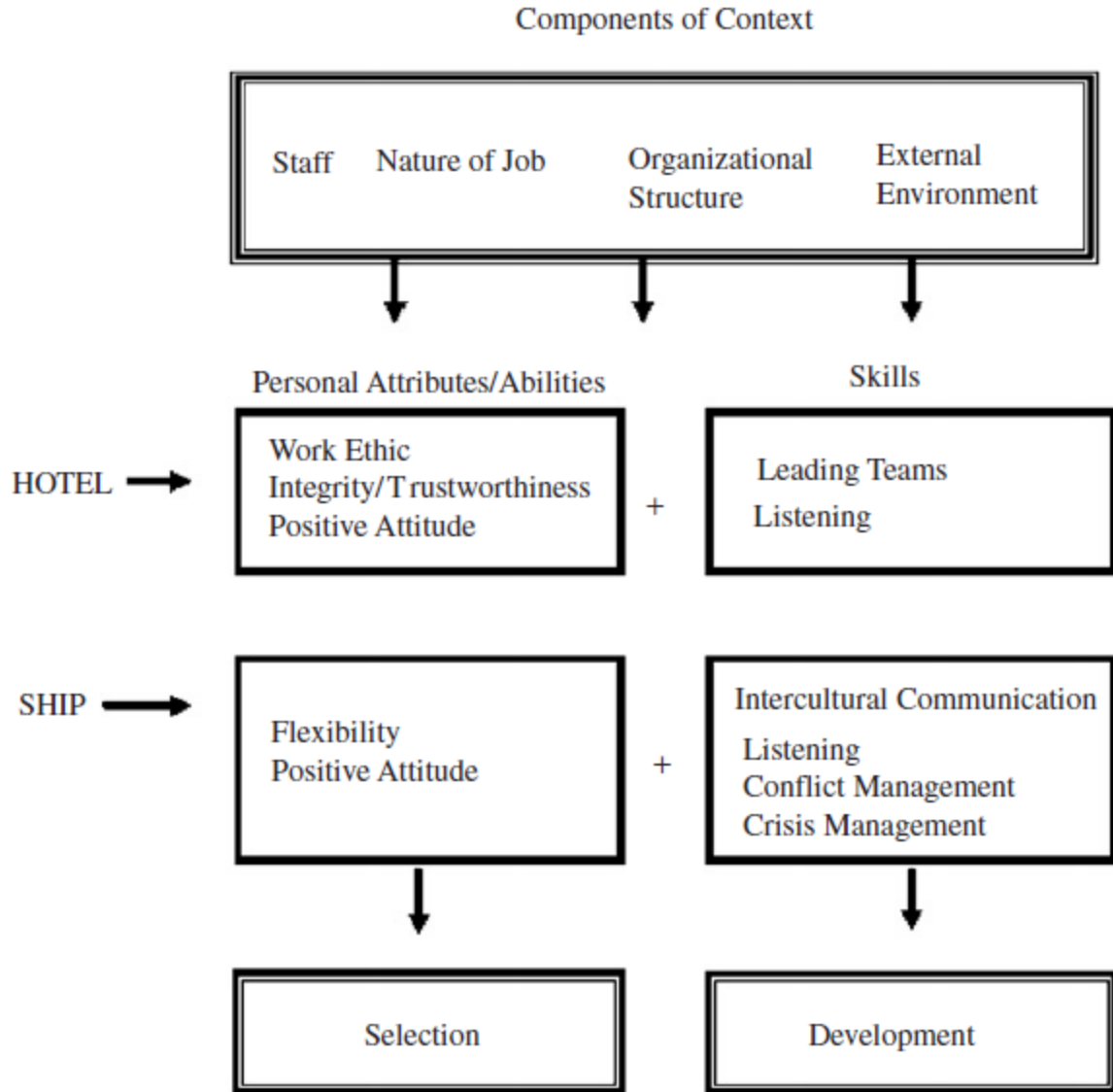
\*Significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 4.** Top ranked means hotel and cruise skills and attributes/abilities combined.

General managers			Cruise directors		
Item	Mean	SD	Item	Mean	SD
Leading teams	4.73	0.521	Intercultural communication	4.74	0.615
Hard work	4.65	0.533	Effective listening	4.73	0.503
Effective listening	4.62	0.523	Managing conflict	4.71	0.561
<i>Trustworthiness</i>	4.59	0.680	Managing crises	4.70	0.539
<i>Integrity</i>	4.55	0.657	<i>Positive attitude</i>	4.70	0.563
<i>Positive attitude</i>	4.52	0.644	<i>Flexibility</i>	4.69	0.493



**Figure 1.** Organizational context and leadership requirements: competencies, selection processes, and development activities.



**Figure 2.** Organizational context and managerial requirements: skills and attributes/abilities.