

## Strengths and weaknesses in management competencies of social and health care managers

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Management competencies and their developing are now, in Finland, more actual than they have been earlier. It is because Finland is currently facing a major health and social services reform; so, managers have to be able to succeed the development of a new organization, and they need to involve and support staff in the change process. In addition to managing, the development of a new organization, managers must be able to involve and support employees in change. In change managing, managers communication competencies are relevant and important for guiding and engaging employees. **Objective:** The aim of this study was to investigate the management competencies of managers and supervisors in the social and health care sector, in North Savo, before the reform of the health and social services. **Methods:** The study was conducted as a Webropol survey among managers of 13 different organizations in the North Savo region, Finland. The participant managers answered questions about their own situation and rated their competences on a Likert scale. The results were analyzed using statistical methods. **Results:** Almost 20% of the respondents were over 60 years old. Nearly, all respondents had studied management in addition to their degree. Preliminary results showed that 32% of the managers had not consciously chosen the management method they used. Among those managers who had consciously chosen a management method, 26% had chosen coaching management, 11% had chosen leading with knowledge and 7% had chosen positive management. 10% of respondents were using more than one management method. The results showed that the weakest areas of management competencies were quality assessment related to quality programs, business competencies, service chain design, and interdisciplinary collaboration. On the other hand, relationship building, dealing with conflict situations, professional competencies and substantive competencies of employees were the greatest strengths. **Conclusions:** The identified weaknesses in the study represent important areas for improvement.

**Key words:** management competencies, management theory, social- and health care management, development of management competence.

## INTRODUCTION

In Finland, both, management of the social and health care and of competence are required to manage; it has come to the fore with the ongoing national reform of the health and social services. The aim of the reform is to introduce the best and most efficient practices in social and health care, secure the supply of skilled labour, improve safety, and respond to the challenges of societal change ( Government of Finland, 2021). Achieving of these objectives will require the development of management competences.

According to Kantanen (2017), defining management competence unambiguously is a challenge because the concept has two terms, management and competence; so, it is necessary to define what is meant by management or competence. Kantanen (2017) specified that management includes, for example, management, motivating people, coaching, managing things, governance, and processes. Moreover, the concepts of competences include, for example, competence, knowledge, and qualifications.

According to previous studies (Pihlainen, 2020 and Virtanen and Stenvall, 2019), more management competences are needed for the managers of social and health care. According to Pihlainen's study on hospitals (2020), it would be important to define and assess management competences. Management competence could also be part of a selection criterion when recruiting managers, as the amount of management training is limited, especially in medical studies. In Finland, a suitable higher university degree is usually sufficient for management positions in social and health care. According to Rissanen and Lammintakainen (2011), there is also a need for further training, especially in the areas of multi-professionalism, strategy, and change management.

Pihlainen (2020) found that a goal-oriented development of management competences is essential. Management competences develop in a variety of management tasks, but require a theoretical basis to support them. In addition, the development of competences will be supported by management networks, virtual learning methods, and management assessments. According to Virtanen and Stenvall (2019), a manager must manage both the totality of the organization's activities and the impact of those activities on the surrounding society. On the authority of them, the manager should have good interpersonal competence. The manager should enable the most optimal working conditions as possible, to ensure the best possible performance of the staff for the benefit of the organization.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

Applications for research permits and the research plan were sent to all social and health care organizations in the North Savo region, Finland (n=19). All these organizations will be merged into the regional county in the context of the health and social services reform. Thirteen organizations granted permission for the study. Among those, who granted permission, were all large social and health care organizations in the region. Six smaller organizations did not respond to the request for authorization.

The organizations that participated in the survey were Kuopio University Hospital, Kysteri Basic Health Care Enterprise, City of Kuopio, Municipality of Siilinjärvi, Municipality of Lapinlahti, Social and Health Care Organization of Ylä-Savo, Municipality of Pielavesi, Municipality of Vesanto, Municipality of Leppävirra, City of Varkaus, Municipality of Rautalampi, Sisä-Savo Health Care Association and Municipality of Keitele.

In the application for the survey, the organization was also asked to designate a contact person to administer the survey. The study was conducted as an electronic survey, and the link of the questionnaire

was included in the cover letter. Each contact person was asked to forward the cover letter to the social and health managers and executives in their organization.

The survey was sent to around 400 managers and 111 of them responded. The survey went through the organization's contact person. Information on the number of people to whom the survey was sent was not available for all organizations.

The questionnaire was based on the Nursing management Competencies of Managers© scale created by Kantanen (2017). In this study, the questionnaire was modified by adding background questions (age, job title, management education beyond professional degree, participation in welfare area management training) and a question on a choice of management method.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 items. Each item varied between 12 and 31 questions. The domains were: promoting of evidence- or knowledge-based decision making, building and maintaining relationships, communication and influencing competence, service initiation and innovation, resilience and composure, integrity and ethical stance, sustained personal commitment, professional competence and credibility, human resource management competence, operational management competence, and development competence. For each question, the manager rated the statement on a Likert scale where 1 = good competence and 5 = poor competence.

The results of the survey were analyzed by statistical methods. The characteristics of the sample were calculated using frequencies and percentages. Means of topics were calculated within each topic.

The study protocol followed the guidelines of the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR). This research was commissioned, but not granted, by Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## RESULTS

This study provided information on the strengths and weaknesses of the management competence of social and health care managers. In addition, it provided more knowledge about the management methods followed by managers.

54% of the respondents were over 51 years old, and almost 20% were over 60 years old. Of the participants, 76% worked in the health sector and 46% in specialized health care. 35% of respondents had more than 30 direct subordinates.

The results showed that 57.6% (n=64) of managers had consciously chosen a particular management method. As well, 10% of managers reported that they combine different management styles in their management work. 26% (n=29) of managers had chosen coaching, although 41.8% of managers found more difficult, than average, to seek feedback from others.

The items of the management competencies and calculated mean scores (Table 1) show the strengths and weaknesses of management. The greatest strengths of management competencies were professional competence and credibility, which assessed employees' substantive knowledge of their work (mean 1.8). 98.2% of managers (n=110) rated themselves as able to use their professional competencies in decision-making. Building and maintaining relationships was also rated equally highly (mean 1.8), with particular emphasis on showing support, reciprocity and empathy.

A weakness in management competencies was seen in development competencies (mean 2.6), which include quality processes, quality management, and quality assessment. 31.4% of managers rated the development competencies for quality programs as poor or rather poor, and 23.8% of managers rated the internal quality management competencies as poor or rather poor. (Table 1.)

The results showed that 96.4% (n=110) of managers consider that they know the rules of the game in the workplace. 61.4% managers considered themselves to be at least fairly familiar with HR-related laws and 64.5% of managers considered themselves to be at least fairly familiar with HR-related contracts.

TABLE 1

Means for the domains of management competences for managers in the social and health care sector.

Competence	Mean
Promotion of evidence-based decision-making	1,9
Building and maintaining relationships	1,8
Communication and influencing skills	2,4
Service initiation and innovation	2,3
Resilience and composure	2,1
Integrity and ethical stance	1,9
Sustained personal commitment	2,1
Professional competence and credibility	1,8
HR management	2,1
Operational management	2,5
Research and development competence	2,6

## DISCUSSION

As a rule, managers rated their own management competencies as good or fairly good. A quarter of the respondents said that they had chosen coaching as their theory of management. This result supports the strategy of the new North Savo Welfare Region organization, which has chosen coaching as its management framework. Almost 70% of managers have consciously chosen one or more management methods as a basis for their work. According to Vuorinen (2008), a consciously chosen management method is useful in management work.

One of the key methods of coaching management is giving and receiving feedback and using it to improve performance (Soback, 2021). The results of this study showed that, even the quarter of managers, used consciously the coaching method; almost half of the managers had difficulty receiving feedback. Based on the results, it can be assumed that managers still need to strengthen their competencies in receiving feedback.

Improving quality is now an essential part of the work of social and health services. This study found that managers rated their skills in developing quality programmes and in internal quality management as weak. This result was surprising, as many Finnish social and health care organisations have their own quality systems, such as the international ISO9001:2008 quality certificate of Kuopio University Hospital.

In this survey, almost all managers rated their knowledge of the rules of the game in the workplace as good, but rated their knowledge of labour legislation or agreements as poor. This result is contradictory, as the rules of the game in Finland are based on the legislation regulating working life and on collective agreements that are generally binding and must be respected in the health care sector.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

According to the survey, managers and supervisors in the social and health care sector rated their overall management skills as quite good. Managers and supervisors rated the overall competences Building and maintaining relationships and Professional competence and credibility as the best.

They rated research and development as their weakest management competency, which was surprising given the high volume of research and development activities.

The results showed that 96.4% (n=110) of managers consider that they know the rules of the workplace. This is an interesting result, as just over 60% of managers consider themselves to be very or fairly familiar with employment legislation. The workplace rules should comply with the legislation and therefore knowledge of the legislation should be increased.

26% of respondents say they have chosen coaching as their leadership mentality. However, many managers find it difficult to give and receive feedback. Giving and receiving feedback is an important part of coaching, so this is a skill that needs to be strengthened in the future.

In conclusion, the weaknesses found in this study are important areas for future improvement of management and must be taken care of new Regional County of health and social services.

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