

1. Good leadership

What characterises a good leader?

What makes some managers especially successful? This has been widely discussed ashore and at sea.

"Successful Leaders¹⁾" is a project in which employees and managers were asked to assess what good leadership is and the core competencies a good manager should have. The project identified five core competencies for the successful leader. These are not the only competencies they should have but the five may be regarded as an essential foundation for successful leadership.



Most of the literature on management describes core competencies that closely resemble the five noted above. But what is good about this project is that the results are presented in terms of good practical advice on good leadership. The practical descriptions are an inspiration for everyone working in management, at sea and ashore.

Core competency No. 1: Human understanding

The manager reads and understands human relations. Such managers are characterized in that they:

- Identify intentions and needs in other people, even when not clearly and openly expressed
- Pick up interpersonal atmosphere/tensions
- Empathize with other people's frustrations/crises and can put themselves in their place
- Have a well-developed sense of understanding of other people's strengths and weaknesses and appreciate their small but essential details
- Can prevent potential inappropriate conflicts between other people

This involves constant awareness of interpersonal relations, not just empathizing with the person or the people the manager happens to be facing.

Small changes aboard a ship can be very important and management should be aware of this. It might be that the atmosphere in the mess or messages on the notice board get slightly sharper in tone than they usually are. Or it could be that the crew are starting to focus on problems rather than solutions.

Human understanding – examples of leadership:

Managers exercising a core competency:

- Constantly scan for atmosphere/tension and non-functional relations around them

1) "Ledere der lykkes" (Successful Leaders), Ed. Ola Jørgensen, Klartekst. Written for KL and KTO - Væksthus for Ledelse, 2005.



Sparring and training are important parts of management duties.

- Can set aside their own feelings and points of view when other people have problems
- Empathize and act appropriately in conflict situations and promote constructive solutions
- Spend time and energy on identifying with the feelings and needs of individuals

In the case histories, several of the seamen describe how they walk around the vessel to talk to people aboard and say how valuable they think this is.

“*There is more chance of somebody coming up to me instead of going all the way up to the 12th floor to tell me something or other. It is easier for me to come and ask how things are going. I get to hear more. Visible management is most important for ensuring free communication on daily routines aboard.*”

Lars Peter Jensen, Captain

Core competency No. 2: Trust from sparring

Managers instil confidence and invite sparring. Such managers are characterized in that they:

- Prioritise requests for sparring and demonstrate their interest and confidentiality when it comes to tackling people's problems
- Help to break up a problem or task into manageable bits
- Listen carefully and ask questions that are seen as helpful
- Give good advice and make specific proposals for solutions to day-to-day problems
- Are interested in other people's development and help them get going on new projects or on developing themselves

Managers should therefore not just be formally accessible but radiate accessibility in everything they say and do. It is not enough just to have an open door if their behaviour shows that it could just as well be shut.

Trust from sparring – examples of leadership:

Managers exercising a core competency:

- Show confidence in employees, encourage development and help find solutions without being asked to
- Are concerned about employee development
- Give top priority to being physically available to employees and ensure that they are visible
- Behave correctly in every way. Always follow up on sparring discussions

Core competence No. 3: Confrontational intervention

Managers are proactive and direct when intervening. Managers who can do this typically:

- Challenge other people's prejudices and fixed positions
- Confront colleagues and employees with their inappropriate patterns of action
- Clearly communicate demands and expectations and give fair, spontaneous feedback on individual performance
- Actively tackle unsolved problems and work for rapid resolutions
- Draw attention to inappropriate situations and remove obstacles

This confrontational style is far from being non-confrontational but such managers are neither aggressive nor insensitive when intervening, just more straightforward and consistent than most.

Confrontational intervention – examples of leadership:

Managers exercising a core competency:

- Quickly tackle unpleasant, critical situations in a constructive way
- Confront staff and other people in the event of discrepancies in the spoken word and action
- Express their expectations for staff and those around them in a clear, motivational way
- Clearly express their values and assessments in a fair, forward-facing way

“Recently there was a little mumbling in the corners aboard. After I had spoken to a couple of people, I decided to have a meeting and called them all in. I started the meeting by saying that we should take turns and that everybody would have the opportunity to say something good and something bad about being aboard. They were not to interrupt each other and they all had two minutes each to start with.”

Jens Ewald Pedersen, Captain



Management can create the conditions for good working relations by ensuring that duties and work allocation are described clearly.

Core competence No. 4: Insistent delegation

Managers routinely delegate responsibility and tasks. Common to them all is that they:

- Challenge employees' reluctance to accept responsibility
- Insist that employees and service partners clearly take ownership of tasks and agreements
- Follow-up on delegated responsibility and consistently crack down on tasks and agreements that have not been solved or completed
- Take responsibility themselves for difficult tasks and clearly communicate on the allocation between their own and others' responsibilities
- Constantly test and adjust the balance between responsibility and goals

In practically all workplaces, people talk about employees having greater responsibility for their duties. Successful managers insist on this, even though some employees might perhaps prefer not to. These leaders do not delegate just for the sake of the employees. They are on the long hard journey towards involving everyone to ensure that jobs get done as well as possible.

Insistent delegation – examples of leadership:

Managers exercising a core competency:

- Make other people responsible in a constructive, challenging way
- Challenge defensive work cultures by insisting on employees taking responsibility
- Do not take over responsibility and tasks that have been assigned to employees or other people
- Change the allocation of responsibility if the situation makes it necessary or appropriate

In some of the case histories, the seamen also report that many people, especially the young, greatly value getting exciting, developmental work. But the seamen also emphasize the importance of people coming and asking if they are in doubt or cannot do the job.

“Aboard the *George Stage* they are challenged when I say this is your task. I am there if you are in doubt and then we will work it out. But I expect you to come and say that you cannot manage it. That is precisely what we try to teach them aboard. You cannot know everything even though you have three or four rings on your sleeve. People need to acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses.”

Helle Barner, Chief Officer

Core competence No. 5: Persistence under pressure

Managers stick to their fundamental values, also when challenged. Such managers are characterized in that they:

- Do not hesitate to make unpleasant or unpopular decisions which they regard as correct or as matters of principle
- Trust their own abilities and decisions in critical situations
- Take the time and space required to deal with conflicts
- Seek inspiration and assistance but take relevant decisions and critical initiatives themselves
- Reflect on their own values and management style

Managers' deep-seated fundamental personal values should not be confused with simple obstinacy, inflexible attitudes and sticking to principles. Fundamental values are part of a more constant personal integrity.

This is a position of strength that the successful manager never abandons, even under pressure. This is where they prefer to believe more in their own fundamental values than their authority, even though it might cause them loss of respect, disciplinary action or even their job.

Persistence under pressure – Examples of leadership:

Managers exercising a core competency:

- Stick to important principles and attitudes with respect to employees, the company, superiors, customers and other people
- Defend vulnerable people openly despite widespread local resistance
- Are brave or principled enough to react in decisive situations on the basis of their convictions rather than following established principles
- Are willing to put their own job and procedures on the line in an important case, even though it might be unpopular



A common approach by management is essential for well-being aboard.

Unanimous management makes for a better vessel

One of the major challenges in leadership at sea is rotating ship management teams which means that in the course of a single tour, crews often sail with different captains, chief officers and chief engineers.

So it is important for well-being that management teams have more or less the same approach to core things aboard. Otherwise it will sow the seeds for uncertainty which can lead to confusion and uncertainty amongst the crew.

So it is important to ensure:

- That rotating teams change over together
- Good overlap/handover
- Standard checklists are reviewed on handover
- That handover includes a review of conditions aboard, such as a report on crew well-being or if there have been some major events.
- That they reach agreement and report on the background/intentions if a start has been made on something new such as good communication aboard or other well-being projects.
- They are bold enough here to tackle things when agreement cannot be reached. Also try to establish a common approach or find a compromise.

The company has a special responsibility here in terms of the framework they have established for how ship management teams work together, for example by giving them the time and space to coordinate their work and planning. The company should be especially aware of how rotating management teams work together. Similarly, ship management should tell the company if they find it is difficult to get things to function properly.

Time to think about leadership

Good leadership is also about giving yourself the time once in a while to consider your own role as a manager. In some companies, this has been made more systematic, for example with manager appraisals but people should also consider making a small assessment of themselves on the basis of such questions as:

- As a manager, what do I do well?
- How could I improve and what should I work on in my role as manager?
- What works well aboard? When does it work best? What am I doing when I work best as a manager?
- What can I do something about aboard and what can I do nothing about?

There is also the option of asking colleagues or the crew. Their motivation for responding should be that it might otherwise be difficult to know how you are regarded as a manager if you never ask other people, which makes it impossible to improve. "You can't take action if you don't know about it."

“ Then I said: "I cannot change anything if I don't know about it." He could see that and said it was actually a good argument, one that he could accept. Communication is very much about daring to address each other the right way if there are things you do not understand or are not satisfied with. ”

Hildur Friis, Captain