

Competencies for effective public middle managers

Effective
public middle
managers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate a set of competencies that characterizes effective public middle managers.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 20 middle managers from several public agencies were interviewed in person using the behavioral event interview technique. In all, 80 stories were deductively coded based on the existing National Civil Service Agency's managerial competency dictionary and inductively examined through a thematic analysis to discover new themes.

Findings – This study's findings suggest that communication, organizing, information seeking, analytical thinking and planning competencies are common competencies, but essential for effective public middle managers. Conversely, achievement orientation, leadership, directiveness, persuasiveness and innovation are competencies that characterize effective public middle managers and distinguish them from average performers. In addition, some other new competencies inductively obtained using a thematic analysis are also important for effective public managers: adherence to laws and regulations, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and technical competencies (technology management, human resource management and financial management).

Research limitations/implications – The research was undertaken using 20 samples divided into superior and average performers; thus, it is limited to developing competency levels to new competencies.

Originality/value – This study identifies the competencies necessary for effective middle managers within the public sector context. Conducting behavioral event interviews with two distinct groups provides empirically unique behavioral evidence of competencies that characterize effective public middle managers and enables to discover new competencies.

Keywords Competencies, Middle managers, Public sector

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The competency of public managers is a prominent topic in today's modern public management reform discussions (Hood and Lodge, 2004). Over the last three decades, public organizations have operated more like private institutions. They have transformed their traditional model of public management and practiced business-like management tools in order to optimize performance and improve efficiency, effectiveness and accountability (Diefenbach, 2009; Noordegraaf, 2015). This neoliberal paradigm of public sector reform, known as new public management (NPM) and increasingly seen as a global phenomenon, is characterized by the practice of market-type mechanisms, managerialism and customer service orientation policies with the intention to correct some inherent pathologies in the public sector (Alonso *et al.*, 2015). In consequence, it has changed human resources practices in public sector. In the old public management era, the practices of human resources management



(HRM) were perceived as conservative peculiarized by convoluted process, fair and equitable treatment of all public servants and protection of public employee's rights. It was more concerned with rules, regulations and bureaucratic process, but not giving much attention on putting the right public servant in the right place and on the right job. By contrast, NPM put an emphasis on results, offering more freedom for public managers to use management tools for completing tasks (Battaglio, 2015). The fostering of performance management with a result-based orientation in NPM challenged public managers to focus on achieving high performance targets aligned with the demands of citizens and societies (Arnaboldi *et al.*, 2015). As a result, improving the capacity and quality of public managers to increase their effectiveness is vital (Khan, 2018). Public managers should possess appropriate skills, knowledge and abilities to adapt with this changing movement (Lodge and Hood, 2012).

Like other countries, in the last few decades Indonesia has experienced public sector reform. After the 1997–1998 economic crisis and subsequent political transition, Indonesia adopted NPM reform in order to improve public sector performance, increase accountability and prevent corruption with its major components including decentralization, new public sector accounting system and improved external audit authority (Harun *et al.*, 2019). Decentralization, delegating functions and finance from central to local governments, was believed would improve public service delivery in Indonesia by making services closer to the public (Turner *et al.*, 2009; Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg, 2013). It was introduced under Law 22/1999 on local autonomy and, later on, the government enacted Law 25/1999 on fiscal relations between central and local governments to support regional autonomy by introducing inter-governmental fiscal transfers. Under these new laws, almost all service delivery functions, such as education, health and sanitation, were devolved to local governments and, subsequently, the local governments were mainly responsible for funding and quality control in these sectors. Various initiatives in HRM have also been introduced to respond to the implementation of NPM agenda. Law 5/2014 on public servant, the latest revision of Law 8/1974, introduced a merit-based system, as an effort to eradicate favoritism, money and personal connection practices that were commonly prevalent in traditional HRM, in order to create a more responsive bureaucracy (Berenschot, 2018). These old common practices were perceived to have resulted in a negative effect on the production and delivery of public services because public servants were placed and assigned in certain positions without considering the required competencies (Blunt *et al.*, 2012). To address this issue, Law 5/2014 underlined the importance of competency framework as a basis for recruitment, selection, placement and promotion of civil servants in addition to qualification. The adoption of competency framework was intended to add considerable value to the improvement of public service delivery as the framework provided a systematic way for the government to appoint the right civil servants in the right positions based on the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities, regardless of political background, race, religion and ethnic group, thus it supported the NPM agenda.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate a set of competencies essential for public middle managers in Indonesia. This study focuses on middle managers because within the public sector context, it appears that middle managers are central players in the process of organizational reforms (Harding *et al.*, 2014). Currently, management literature has prominently discussed the important role of middle managers in organizations. Not only are they responsible for assuring the quality of the work, controlling expenditure and managing team conflict (Giauque, 2015) but, as Borins (2001) pointed out, middle managers are also the originators of innovation in public organizations. They contribute substantially to the process of organizational change even though they have little formal power to act strategically. Indeed, several studies have shown the importance of middle managers' sensemaking capabilities for both championing change through selling issues and executing strategic change via propagating the change intent (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). They also

add value to the strategic change plan by modifying the implementation of the plan (Currie, 2000). They may adjust strategy plan implementations, for example, by challenging performance indicators used in the organization performance framework (Currie, 1999). Furthermore, as entrepreneurial agents, they take a central role in transferring the best practices of the private sector into the public service arena (Gatenby *et al.*, 2015). Even more interesting is that the demand for middle managers to undertake a greater strategic role in public organizations is rising (Pablo *et al.*, 2007).

Middle managers can be defined as management personnel who are accountable for the work or administrative process in an organizational unit, rather than company-wide responsibilities, and play a key integrative role in linking the activities of vertically related groups (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). As part of an organization's control system, middle managers hierarchically hold positions between upper and supervisor management levels (Hewison, 2002; Diefenbach, 2011; Robbins and Coulter, 2012). In addition, they have at least one manager reporting to them (Preston and Loan-Clarke, 2000; Merali, 2003; Hyde *et al.*, 2012). Specifically, they can be the head of a function, team or office (Chen *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, they have a unique position in organizations, as they gain greater access to resources than supervisors but have less control than top managers (Dutton and Ashford, 1993). They transform strategic plans set by upper management into operational activities (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994). Finally, they have sufficient access to higher levels of management combined with a comprehensive knowledge of operations (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008).

There have been myriad studies regarding competency of managers, but those focusing on middle managers are still under-researched (Qiao and Wang, 2009). Prior studies focusing on public sector competencies are relatively sparse (Bhatta, 2001), even research on public sector leadership is limited (Fernandez *et al.*, 2010). In addition, as highlighted by Chen *et al.* (2017), related research on public administration, a topic broader than competency, with an emphasis on middle managers is rare, and, according to Walker *et al.*'s study (2014), those focusing on HRM topics within the context of East and Southeast Asia countries are infrequent, numbering only 13 articles at the time. Given these facts, there is still a research gap in competency modeling for the middle management level, particularly within public sector context. This study intends to fill the gap. The identification of public manager competencies will benefit the government and public servants, particularly in Indonesia, as it will inform what competencies characterize effective public middle managers. Furthermore, because the research was conducted in public organizations from a developing country, it would enrich competency studies that were mostly undertaken in developed countries. The next sections are organized as follows. We first review competency literature. Then, we present the research method and its results. Finally, we conclude our findings and implications for future research.

Literature review

Competency definition

"The competency approach to HRM is not new." This practice can be traced back since the Romans era (Draganidis and Mentzas, 2006, p. 51). However, it gained popularity in the 1970s after David McClelland, an American psychologist, demonstrated that an individual's behavioral characteristics are much more powerful than intelligence and aptitude in predicting effective work performance (Brophy and Kiely, 2002; Özçelik and Ferman, 2006; Draganidis and Mentzas, 2006; Wu, 2013). In public management, the advent of competency modeling can be traced back to the early 1980s, when ideas regarding NPM spread quickly in developed countries (Horton, 2002). According to Hondeghem and Vandermeulen (2000), the main reason for initiating this approach in the public sector was to support the dramatic change of public bureaucracies, which began to embrace a more personalized organizational culture.

There is no universal agreement among academicians and practitioners over what the term “competency” precisely means. A number of attempts have been made to define the notion. Earlier definitions of competency can be found in the work of Powers (1987), Spencer and Spencer (1993) and Kiely and Chakman (1993). According to Powers (1987) and Spencer and Spencer (1993), a competency refers to an underlying characteristic that is causally associated with superior performance on the job. It can be knowledge, skills, motives, traits and self-concept (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Kiely and Chakman (1993, p. 150) provide a slightly different definition of competency, that is “the ability to perform the activities within an occupation or function to the standard expected in employment. A competency is a combination of the specification and application of a knowledge or skill within the occupation, to the appropriate standard.” Kiely and Chakman’s definition implies that a competency is more related to an activity, not an underlying characteristic and, thus, limited to knowledge and skills. While Spencer and Spencer (1993) use effective or superior performance as reference to define a competency, Kiely and Chakman utilize a certain appropriate standard that may be interpreted as average standard. Later definitions of competency can be found in the work of Marrelli *et al.* (2005), Draganidis and Mentzas (2006) and Boyatzis (2008). Marrelli *et al.* (2005) defines a competency as a human capability that can be measured, is necessary for effective performance and can be a single or a mixture of knowledge, skills and personal characteristics. It may imply that a competency can be referred to a very specific skill (for example financial analysis) or quite broad features (a combination of skills and other characteristics, for example managing performance). To make it more complicated, Draganidis and Mentzas (2006, p. 53) put forward another definition of competency, that is “a combination of tacit and explicit knowledge, behavior and skills, that gives someone the potential for effectiveness in task performance.” Thus, it suggests that a competency does not include a single skill or knowledge. According to Boyatzis (2008, p. 6), a competency is “a set of related but different sets of behavior organized around an underlying construct, which is called the intent.” It refers to a behavioral dimension that a person brings into his or her job and the behavior itself is perceived as a representation of intent. The latest definitions of competency can be located in the work of Gravina (2017) and El Asame and Wakrim (2018). For Gravina (2017), a competency is the integration of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. The usage of “integration” makes the definition even more complex as it may indicated to include all four attributes. Another definition is concluded by El Asame and Wakrim (2018) after reviewing several literatures. They suggest that a competency is a collection of individual characteristics that an individual has or is required to have for appropriately performing an activity within a specific context, and it is known as a quadrilateral of skill, knowledge, performance and context. It may imply that a competency refers to knowledge and skills mapping to a certain activity and context. It is, thus, contextual in nature. In our study, we use a relatively broad definition of competency, that is an underlying characteristic that may include a single or combination of knowledge, skills or other personal characteristics that are important for successful or effective job performance. It is represented by the behavioral terms (Boyatzis, 2008).

Competency identification method

One can observe that there are several methods circulating in the literature to identify competencies related to superior performance. These include surveying the perception of individuals (e.g. Suh *et al.*, 2012), conducting semi-structured interviews with informants (e.g. Clement and Bigby, 2012), holding focus groups (e.g. Johnston *et al.*, 2015) and undertaking behavioral event interviews (e.g. Dainty *et al.*, 2005). However, the self-report approach may be misleading in suggesting certain competencies, as job holders sometimes believe their jobs demand “more socially prestigious competencies than those actually

needed” (Marrelli *et al.*, 2005, p. 543). On the other hand, behavioral event interviews generate data that are invaluable for validation and new competencies discovery but it is costly and time consuming (Spencer and Spencer, 1993).

A competency should predict performance (Liang *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the concept of individual performance is important. Numerous individual performance concepts are circulating in management literature. It includes task performance, contextual performance and counterproductive work behavior (Koopmans *et al.*, 2011). Various researchers have used different measurements of individual performance in their competency studies. For example, Xu and Ye (2014) used three dimensions of job performance of teachers, namely teaching performance, research performance and profession services based on the analysis of teaching jobs and consulting personnel specialist. Srivastava and Jaiswal (2017) utilized individual performance data from the company to select superiors and average spinning masters. In order to define good EHS managers, Wang *et al.* (2011) also used individual performance data provided by the company in addition to recommendations of their colleagues.

Research on competency

Numerous competency studies, both conceptual and empirical, have been circulating mostly in management literatures. Those studies have been carried out in a wide range of fields and have employed various methods. Table I exhibits some competency studies located in recent literatures.

As shown in Table I, recent studies on competency related to public servants can be found in the work of Darling and Cunningham (2016), Lan and Hung (2018) and Gupta *et al.* (2018). Darling and Cunningham’s study (2016) focused on exploring the similarities and differences of context, values, and competencies between public and private sector managers. They interviewed 15 senior leaders who had experience working in private and public sectors. The competencies were identified by asking them about competencies that were essential in order to be an effective leader. They found several competencies that

Author	Focus area	Competency identification methods
Geng <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Dentists	Delphi using 20 experts
Shi <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Public health physicians	Mixed method: behavioral event interviews to 56 public health professionals (high achievers and low achievers); survey using stratified random sampling
Abdullah <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Construction managers	Multi-layered thematic of literature review; interview to 9 experts; survey using purposive sampling
Liang <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Health service managers	Job analysis; focus group discussion with middle- and senior-level public hospital and CHS managers; online survey
Koenigsfeld <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Private club managers	Survey using random sampling to club managers
Manley and Zinser (2012)	Career and technical education teachers	Delphi using three groups of experts (local administrators, teachers and teacher-educators and/or researchers)
Altman and Mascarenhas (2016)	Dental public health specialists	A multidisciplinary panel of experts
Lan and Hung (2018)	Leaders in public administration	In-depth interview with 15 experts and a survey using 529 respondents
Gupta <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Administrative service officers	Survey to all faculty members of LBSNAA; focus group discussion with selected faculty members; online survey to direct entrant IAS officers
Darling and Cunningham (2016)	Public and private managers	Critical incident interviews with 15 managers experiencing in both the public and private sectors

Table I.
Some recent competency studies

were important and distinct to public sector including managing competing interests, managing the political environment, communicating in a political environment, interpersonal motivational skills, adding value for clients and impact assessment in decision making. Lan and Hung (2018) conducted a leadership competency study for leaders in public administration in Vietnam using an in-depth interview technique to 15 experts coming from government agencies and universities and a survey to identify which competencies were perceived important. They proposed four groups of competencies consisting of 14 important sub-competencies: regional context competency (knowledge of local culture and knowledge of strategy and policy for local development), professional competency (knowledge of the public administration sector and knowledge of the organization mission), human management competency (building relationships, training and developing employees and motivating employees) and self-development competency (strategic outlook and thinking, change management, planning and organizing, decision making, communication skill, continuous learning and result orientation). Another study was undertaken by Gupta *et al.* (2018) with emphasis on identifying competencies for administrative service officers in India. Based on the results from focus group discussions with selected faculty members and a survey of 218 Indian administrative officers, they found eight competencies that were essential for administrative officer: people first; leading others; integrity; decision making; planning, coordination and implementation; problem solving; self-awareness and self-control and innovative thinking. These competencies were, then, clustered into four meta competencies (stakeholder analysis and decision making, managing change and innovation, team building and positive administrator personality). Although these three studies are important, it is interesting to note, however, that the research drew upon the perception of senior leaders, administrators or other experts; thus, it may cover some competencies that do not represent the actual behaviors of superior public servants.

Research methods

Sample

Our sample was selected from middle managers working for the government of West Java Province, Indonesia. The government has over 35,000 employees and provides services to the most populous region in Indonesia, consisting of over 48m people and covering an area of 35,777 square kilometers (BPS-Statistics of West Java Province, 2018). The province is one of the most modernized regions in the country, with annual economic growth of over 5 percent in the last three years. It is the main destination of foreign direct investment and has the largest industrial areas nationwide.

Because our study also focuses on inductively exploring competencies demonstrated by effective middle managers, as the research on this context is sparse, it is suitable that participants for the study were distinguished based on work performance: superior and average (Boyatzis, 2011). Two criteria of work performance were used: employee performance appraisals and nominations for a Governor's Award. Superior middle managers are those who received a score of A in their performance appraisal and had been nominated as an outstanding employee by their agency to win a Governor's Award. All others were categorized as average middle managers. In this study, middle managers are heads of divisions in public agencies. They report to heads of public agencies and supervise some heads of subdivisions. Target participants were chosen using a non-random sampling method. In total, 20 middle managers were invited to participate via letter with a ratio of 1.5:1, as suggested by Spencer and Spencer (1993), representing superior and average groups, respectively. If any middle manager refused to participate, additional middle managers were invited to reach our sample size. Finally, 20 middle managers participated of which 12 were superior and 8 were average.

Data collection and analysis

The research applied a qualitative approach and behavioral event interviews were conducted for collecting data. This technique can be regarded as a powerful tool for identifying managerial behaviors that can predict job performance (Fernandez, 2006; Campion *et al.*, 2011). The behavioral event interview protocol was used to question participants' past behaviors in face-to-face sessions, thereby exploring how middle managers actually behave when effectively dealing with various real situations. In particular, we asked each participant to briefly tell us about their professional background and current job positions and responsibilities as an introduction and for building a rapport. In the main part, participants were asked to specifically recall and describe two events in which they felt effective and two others in which they felt ineffective in their jobs during the last two years. The STAR (situation/task, action, result) method (see Spencer and Spencer, 1993) was employed to guide the interviewer in conducting the interviews. Samples of STAR questions include "What was the situation?" "Who were involved in the events?" and "What did participants do in response to the situation?" Participants were also informed that their data would be treated confidentially and interviews would be recorded. Each interview took an average of 2 h. In total, there were 80 stories conveyed by middle managers in our sample.

Before analyzing the data, all interviews were first transcribed verbatim into electronic format. We applied two analysis methods to identify competencies from the interview transcripts. The first deductively analyzed the interview transcripts for known competencies by utilizing the National Civil Service Agency managerial competency dictionary produced by the Government of Indonesia as our initial competency codebook. This dictionary was chosen because it covers a wide range of competencies in the public sector domain in detail. It consists of 33 competencies grouped into five clusters, as shown in Table II, and each competency has seven levels of proficiency ranging from 0 (the lowest) to 6 (the highest). The second inductively derived new themes from the interview transcripts using a thematic analysis.

We applied a multi-phase coding process, as outlined by Saldaña (2013) to analyze the data. First, to improve our initial competency codebook, we randomly selected a subsample of 20 stories from five superior performer transcripts (25 percent of the sample). Two researchers coded the transcripts separately using two elemental coding methods: *in vivo* and initial coding. Next, a protocol coding method was employed to identify competencies within the subsample based on our initial competency codebook. Second, the axial coding method was applied to group and categorize similarly coded data and resulted in the inductive discovery of new competencies. Third, we checked for inter-rater reliability based on deductive and inductive coding processes through discussion and refinement and eventually agreed (96 percent) upon the existing and new competency themes. Fourth, we updated our initial competency codebook by adding new competencies derived from the inductive process. It is important to note that the new competency themes do not have competency levels due to the limitation of the sample size but do provide behavioral descriptions. Thus, our new competency codebook comprises 33 known/initial competencies and 9 new competencies. The list of new competencies is reported in Table III. Fifth, the updated competency codebook was utilized to identify competencies in all 80 stories by two researchers individually. Specifically, we examined the presence or absence of each competency. We considered that the competency was present when individuals were able to demonstrate at least the level two of known competency and the behavioral indicators for new competencies. We followed Camuffo *et al.* (2009) to calculate the presence or absence of each competency with the story as the unit of analysis; in total, the maximum number for each competency was 80. Sixth, we checked for inter-rater reliability through discussion and refinement and eventually found 93 percent agreement.

Table II.
National Civil Service
Agency managerial
competency list

<i>Thinking abilities</i>	<i>Managing task</i>
Thinking flexibility	Service orientation
Innovation	Occupational safety
Analytical thinking	Developing partnership
Conceptual thinking	Negotiation
<i>Managing self</i>	Entrepreneurship
Adaptation to change	Information seeking
Integrity	Concern for order
Persistence	Oral communication
Self-control	Written communication
Organizational commitment	Decision making
Initiative	Organizing
Achievement orientation	Planning
<i>Managing others</i>	Change management
Teamwork	Quality orientation
Developing other	Conflict management
Leadership	<i>Managing socio-cultural</i>
Guiding	Responsive to cultural influences
	Empathy
	Social interaction

Source: National Civil Service Agency Decree No. 7 (2013)

Results

The comparison of the presence of competencies between superior and average public middle managers is summarized in Table IV and Figure 1. This illustrates that superior and average performers demonstrate different behaviors to deal with various situations in their jobs. The predominant competencies demonstrated by superior performers were achievement orientation (90 percent), oral communication (85 percent), organizing (85 percent), leadership (77 percent), information seeking (73 percent), analytical thinking (69 percent) and planning (63 percent). Meanwhile, competencies that most frequently cited in the stories for average public middle managers were oral communication (84 percent), organizing (78 percent), financial management (66 percent), information seeking (56 percent), analytical thinking (53 percent) and planning (53 percent). The gap percentage between these two performer groups shows interesting results in which the highest gaps exist for achievement orientation (58 percent), leadership (52 percent), directiveness (33 percent), persuasiveness (33 percent) and innovation (29 percent).

It is also interesting to note that the frequencies of new competencies demonstrated by superior and average performers were different, except for adherence to laws and regulations. Directiveness, persuasiveness, self-learning orientation, technology management, political sensitivity and multi-stakeholder collaboration were more frequently cited in the stories by superior performers than by average ones. Moreover, political sensitivity was not reflected in the stories of average performers. Conversely, financial management is dominantly demonstrated by average performers.

The following are examples of quotations for each new competency discovered from the behavior incident interviews.

Directiveness

In the beginning of May, I emphasized more on updating information because there will be an assessment. Once again, I emphasized on the latest information of activities that my agencies have done when it came to May. So, I made sure that there was no information of my agency activities carried out by all divisions in the agency that was not informed on the web in May.

Competency name	Behavioral description
Directiveness	Provides clear standards and directions for others to complete work tasks as expected Demands others to be accountable for adhering to the standard
Self-learning orientation	Is aware of his/her own abilities and the need to develop his/her own abilities Is personally committed to continuous learning and acts accordingly to increase his/her knowledge/skills/abilities necessary for task accomplishment
Technology management	Recognizes the role of technology advancement to facilitate process and performance improvement Utilizes current technology development in workplace to improve organizational and work performance
Persuasiveness	Has clear expectations and good preparation Uses such proper actions or approaches to convince others or gain acceptance for ideas as compelling reasoning, explaining advantages and utilizing experts
Financial management	Understands organization's budget processes Is able to calculate and forecast required program budget and determine budget allocation items
Multi-stakeholder collaboration	Is able to identify related stakeholders to achieve common purposes and complete tasks Gains commitment from internal and external stakeholders by using various course of actions, such as stating purposes, proactively communicating with stakeholders and managing expectations
Adherence to laws and regulations	Understands laws and regulations that affect the organization's operation Ensures that the organization acts in conformity with laws and regulations
Political sensitivity	Is sensitive to and understands political issues and decisions that may influence the achievement of organizational goals. Effectively works with political members to achieve organizational goals
Human resources management	Recognizes competency problems of his/her subordinates Has knowledge of human resources management

Table III.
List of new
competencies

[...] On Monday, I announced agency activity for the next following days in the morning roll call, so I knew all activities that would be carried out by all divisions in the next following days. Well, when I opened the web in the next following days and I found that the information has not been updated with the new ones, I reminded the head of divisions to update the information and it must be finished that day. [...] I called the subdivision head and his administration staff, then I told them my evaluation results of web information that based on the survey there were some negative comments from citizens about the web information. I told them what to be improved.

Self-learning orientation

For me, information technology was a new thing. My educational background was in administration, but in my new position I had to deal with technology with processes that I did not understand before. I learned and tried hard to give the best. I read related books, followed some trainings, and asked as many questions as possible to various experts. [...] I even asked technical things which I thought that asking technical things was something that most public managers avoided.

Technology management

The system was not static. The number of users increased, and thus storage would also increase. It needed more hard disks, more memory, and software updates. Therefore, the system needed to be rechecked about its overall condition. [...] I worked with IT security experts to conduct penetration testing for main system and networks. [...] I wanted to make sure that the system I managed was safe.

Competencies	Percentage of the presence within stories		
	Superior performers	Average performers	Percentage of gap
Achievement orientation	90	31	58
Oral communication	85	84	1
Organizing	85	78	7
Leadership	77	25	52
Information seeking	73	56	17
Analytical thinking	69	53	16
Planning	63	53	9
Decision making	56	44	13
Written communication	46	25	21
Directiveness	46	13	33
Persuasiveness	46	13	33
Adherence to laws and regulations	44	47	-3
Service orientation	40	13	27
Financial management	35	66	-30
Initiative	35	16	20
Innovation	35	6	29
Self-learning orientation	33	6	27
Multi-stakeholder collaboration	29	19	10
Human resources management	25	13	13
Technology management	25	3	22
Integrity	23	16	7
Conceptual thinking	19	0	19
Political sensitivity	13	0	13
Self-control	10	6	4
Empathy	8	3	5
Conflict management	4	0	4
Entrepreneurship	2	3	-1
Teamwork	0	16	-16

Table IV.
Percentage of the presence of competencies

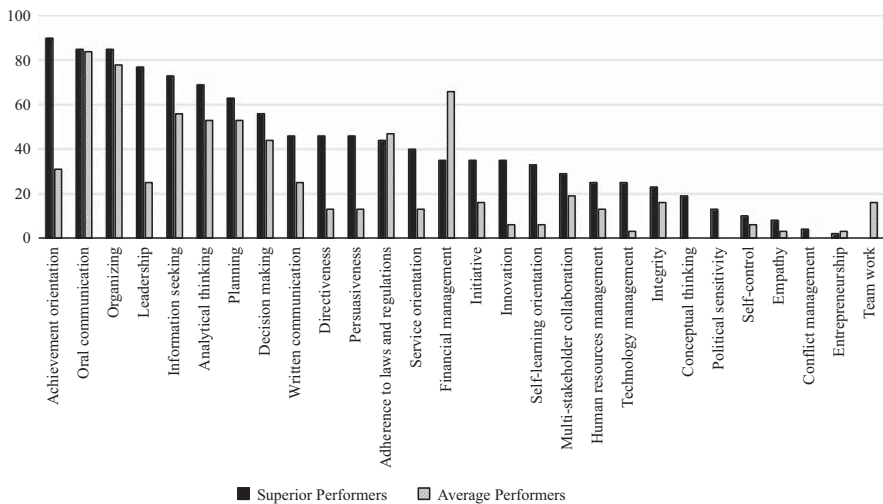


Figure 1.
Comparison of the presence of competencies between superior and average performance (%)

Persuasiveness

I said: "I am sorry sir. I would like to report about this planned activity in advance, as early as possible, because it is an iconic activity of our agency for West Java Province birthday." [...] I said to the head of agency that I wanted to change the concept. I explained [to] him about the new concept. [...] Then, he agreed with the new concept and that was all that I needed, [the] word "agree."

Financial management

I said to the head of agency that I planned to change the concept. That meant that there would be changes in the previous budget plan since it could not accommodate my new concept. I checked the previous budget plan and found that some planned budget items were not suitable to support my new concept so these should be changed. [...] I discussed with my friends in [the] finance division.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration

West Java citizen must be healthy. That was what I thought. Although the challenge was big, it must be tried. [...] Okay, in West Java, many people had been infected with measles and rubella, but many people did not know about these diseases. So, for example, the impact of rubella on pregnant women was serious, i.e. tormenting fetus, such as heart defection, but most citizen were not aware of it. [...] I said this was our problem. If this problem was not resolved, the next generation would not succeed our fight. [...] I led the operation of this program. [...] I asked one of [the] international organizations to help the program by supporting us with software for reporting, some logistics, and trainings because the program did not have any budget for it. [...] I and a team made proposals, calculated how many targets, what we had and what we [did] not [have]. So, we sorted out which parties could help us. [...] I involved [a] local NGO since this NGO had good communication. For the empowerment of West Java community, this local NGO is far more powerful than other NGOs. [...] I visited a profession health association to support the program. On the other time, I invited this association.

Adherence to laws and regulations

I thought that it had to be in accordance with the regulations. If, based on regulations, this commission had to be ended, then it had to be ended. [...] I needed opinions from [the] Law Bureau what to do based on regulations. [...] I wanted to be sure that I had followed the rules. [...] I argued with them about the rules; these are the regulations, the steps needed to be followed and the timeframes.

Political sensitivity

I felt that the political interest was strong, so I decided to wait. [...] I consulted house representatives because I wanted to encourage them and also to know the reasons why they delayed the process. I was alone. I was 'surrounded by them'. [...] Some house representatives and I went along to [...] for consultation.

Human resources management

At that time, I did not have anyone who had graduated in [the] communication field. Then, in the next year, I recruited a new employee from other agencies. I chose him because he graduated in communication and had good communication skills. I had interviewed him informally and found that he has some good ideas. I personally put him as a coordinator for communication.

Discussion

A major finding from this study shows that superior public middle managers exhibit different competencies from average ones. Achievement orientation is mostly cited in the

stories of superior public middle managers. This is not the case for average performers. In the stories, superior public middle managers often tried to achieve higher targets set by upper managers, while average performers focused on completing the tasks determined by top managers and fulfilling administrative related to financial matters. Most average performers were interested more on how the budgets were being spent to support the tasks' fulfillment or adjusting the targets to the budget allocations. By contrast, superior performers frequently tried to optimize the budget allocations in order to achieve higher targets. Thus, it is not surprising that financial management competency is frequently cited in the stories of average performers. This finding supports previous studies that emphasized the importance of result orientation for public administration leaders (for example Lan and Hung, 2018). Achievement orientation competency has also been recognized as an important component of emotional intelligence in order to become an excellence leader (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2017). Moreover, as the public management in developing countries have been apparently moving from rule to result orientation due to the implementation of NPM (Cameron, 2015), thus this finding is consistent with current management movement.

Another important finding of our study is the occurrence of oral communication and organizing as the second and third most cited competencies in the stories of superior and also average public middle managers. It may imply that these competencies are common competencies needed to be minimally effective but they do not necessarily differentiate superior performers over average ones. In other words, oral communication and organizing competencies can be referred to threshold competencies (Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Sanghi, 2016). In our sample, oral communication competency was frequently demonstrated in the form of presentation as they are required to explain the concept of programs translated from organizational strategic plans. The importance of communication competency for public managers was also found in previous study (Darling and Cunningham, 2016; Lan and Hung, 2018). Meanwhile, organizing competency was mostly represented by assigning subordinates to do the tasks based on their abilities and monitoring them periodically. This finding is parallel with the result of Lan and Hung's study (2018) that organizing competency was perceived important for leaders in public administration. It is interesting to note, however, that our study extends previous studies in which oral communication and organizing competencies, although essential, may not be able to distinguish superior performers from average performers. One possible explanation for this finding is that these competencies were commonly practiced by public middle managers in Indonesia, even before the introduction of NPM. Indeed, classical management theory points out that organizing lies in the heart of leading organizations (Roman and McWeeney, 2017).

The third interesting finding from this study is that leadership competency is much more frequently cited in the stories of superior performers than those of average performers. Leadership competency is the fourth highest cited behavior in the superior performer stories. This finding is appealing because this competency is infrequently observed in the stories of average performers resulting in a relatively large percentage gap. Accordingly, it may indicate that leadership competency differentiates superior performers from average ones. In the stories, leadership competency was demonstrated by guiding, motivating and helping others to achieve organizational goals. The significance of leadership competency for excellence leaders has been emphasized by Goleman and Boyatzis (2017). Lan and Hung's study (2018) also suggested that motivating employees was perceived as an importance characteristic of leaders in public sector. Moreover, in relation to public sector leadership, Orazi *et al.* (2013) argued that leaders in public sector should be seen as transformational leaders with putting more emphasis on maintaining integrity in tasks' accomplishment than leveraging transactional relationships. Different from a transactional leader, a transformational leader determines and communicates organizational vision and

goals and motivates others with such non-monetary stimulus as persuasion, inspiration and integrity attraction. In this context, our study also encountered that persuasiveness was much more frequently seen in the stories of superior performers than those of average ones. Thus, it may indicate that this competency can differentiate superior public middle managers from average ones. In addition, integrity was observed, yet not so often, in the stories of superior public middle managers. The integrity competency was mostly exhibited in the form of encouraging others to follow organizational ethics and modeling ethical behaviors. It might be the indication that superior public middle managers combined these three competencies to become a transformational leader. However, it is also interesting to note that directiveness competency, that its primary concern is also to influence mostly using positional power, is more frequently cited in the stories of superior performers than those of average one resulting in a relatively large percentage gap. It may also indicate that this competency can be categorized as differentiating competencies (Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Sanghi, 2016). One possible explanation for this finding is because of superior performers' concern for achieving the targets. They wanted to make sure that their subordinates understand what to do in order to achieve the targets.

The fourth important finding is related to information seeking, analytical thinking and planning competencies. These competencies are commonly observed in the stories of superior and average public managers. For this reason, they can be viewed as threshold competencies (Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Sanghi, 2016). Planning competency was also perceived important for leader in public sector in the study of Lan and Hung (2018). However, their study did not identify information seeking and analytical thinking as essential competencies for public administration leaders. In our opinion, information seeking and analytical thinking are important for public managers as currently public sectors often confront with wicked problems in policy making. These problems are characterized by being complex, unpredictable or open ended (Head and Alford, 2015).

Finally, the last noteworthy contribution from this study is the importance of innovation competency for characterizing effective public middle managers. This competency is more frequently observed in the stories of superior performers than that of average performers. It indicates that innovation competency may differentiate superior public managers from average ones. In the stories, innovation competency was often demonstrated by adopting ideas from other industries to be implemented in the public organizations. This finding supports a previous study by Borins (2001), who discovered that innovation in public organizations was frequently introduced by middle management. In addition, innovation in public sector is connected to public management movement (De Vries *et al.*, 2016), thus this finding is crucial to support the success of NPM implementation in Indonesia.

Implication

This research raises a number of implications for the improvement of Indonesia government's competency framework and for management and leadership development. First, finding from this study suggests that in order to improve the performance of public middle managers, the government should focus on developing several critical competencies that most probably differentiate superior performers from average performers. They include achievement orientation, leadership, persuasiveness, directiveness and innovation competencies. These competencies, indeed, will support the government to successfully implement its public management reform as managerialism, a feature of NPM, is result oriented. For example, developing innovation competency will increase the ability of public middle manager to identify, select and adopt new ideas or even create a genuine new idea that can be applied in order to increase public service delivery or to improve efficiency. Moreover, these competencies should be used as one of promotion criteria and recruitment and selection criteria for public middle managers, particularly in Indonesia, because not only public

servants who have these competencies would be predicted as successful public managers but also it would be more cost effective for public organizations. As suggested by Spencer and Spencer (1993) and Sanghi (2016), organizations should select for motive and trait competencies in hiring and promoting employees in order to obtain more cost-effective way.

Second, nine new competencies inductively found should be added to the Indonesian government's competency framework. They are directiveness, persuasiveness, self-learning orientation, political sensitivity, multi-stakeholder collaboration, technology management, financial management, HRM and adherence to laws and regulations. However, more studies are needed in order to investigate the competency level of these competencies. For the first step, the government can focus on directiveness and persuasiveness competencies because they may discriminate superior performers over average performers.

Third, our findings can be utilized by education and training institutions focusing in public management or administration, particularly in Indonesia. Because public middle managers can be perceived as equivalent as those who have master degrees in public management or administration, these findings can inform those institutions to adjust their master degree curriculum. By doing so, they can better prepare their graduates with the needs of current public middle managers.

Limitations and future research directions

There are some limitations of this study. The sample were 20, that was theoretically adequate for conducting behavioral event interviews but limit us to translate the behaviors found in the stories into competency levels. In addition, the data were collected from provincial level of government agencies; thus this contextual factor may limit the generalizability of the findings. For example, public middle managers in government agencies at national level may show other important competencies to be successful in their jobs. However, our findings can become an important starting point for undertaking research in that area.

We propose several future research directions. First, verifying new competencies found in our study by extending sample size will provide rich data for developing competency levels of new competencies. This area of research is important as it will provide a comprehensive competency dictionary for further refining and quantitatively testing a set of competencies for effective public middle managers. Second, expanding our study findings into different governmental levels will contribute to our understanding of how contextual factor may affect necessary competency for public middle managers. It will also provide which crucial competencies are common across all public middle managers, and thus, in practice, will provide invaluable insights and directions for not only the governments but also education and training institutions to focus on particular competencies for developing effective public middle managers.

Conclusion

Identifying a combination of essential competencies for public middle managers is important to support public management reform. Our study has successfully investigated which competencies are necessary for public middle managers to be effective in their jobs. In addition, our major competencies themes inductively discovered from the behavioral event interview contribute to our understanding that competencies essential for public middle managers to some extent are different from those in private organizations. It also indicates the importance for updating current competency models and aligns them with the latest challenges that public middle managers encountered. Finally, our results can substantially inform public middle managers, governments and education and training institutions to effectively select essential competencies for supporting the performance of public middle managers.

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