

Senior managers: are they really different?

A study of personality and reasoning factors
in 1500 international managers

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Introduction

Many suggestions have been made as to the personal qualities or competencies which single out those who make it to the top. Supporting evidence has typically come from anecdotal experience or formal research studies. As practitioners engaged by clients to help them make career and development decisions with and about people, this is a subject of great interest to ourselves. In common with everyone else we have theory, published research and our own experience of assessing managers to inform our judgements. In addition though we also have an extensive database of psychometric information on managers whom we have assessed during the course of many years of consulting work. The purpose of this paper is to describe what we found when we analysed our own database with the objective of seeing whether we could find any significant differences in the psychometric data between those who reach senior positions and those who do not.

The psychometric measures

We use a battery of 6 psychometric tests of personality and reasoning in our assessment process for managers and 'high flyers', but for the purposes of this study we only used the results from four. They are as follows:

■ NEO PI-R

A 240 item paper and pencil personality inventory based on the five factor model of trait personality. The five domains measured are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.

■ Myers Briggs Type Indicator™

A measure of 'psychological type' which profiles people on 4 dimensions of personal preference, Extraversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, Judging-Perception.

■ GMA(A)

A measure of flexibility of thinking and the ability to identify patterns or systems.

■ Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (W-GCTA)

A test of analytical reasoning skills which measures 5 aspects of critical thinking ability; Drawing Inferences, Recognising Assumptions, Deductive Reasoning, Logical Interpretation, Argument Evaluation.

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Research objective

The study was to explore the relationship between the personality traits and reasoning abilities measured by our psychometric tests, and management success as defined by reaching a senior position and being successful there. The objective was to identify whether there are any personality traits or reasoning ability differences between those who reach senior positions and those who do not. We conducted the study in two steps; first we adopted a fairly general approach and compared all the senior managers in our database with all other managers to see whether there were any differences at this rather broad level. Second we narrowed the investigation down to a small population of senior managers whose track record was known to us. The aim of the second study was to identify whether there were any differences in personality traits and reasoning abilities between those with a track record of success compared to those with an inconsistent track record. In terms of methodology it was not our intention to conduct an in depth piece of research at this stage; we were keen simply to establish whether there was 'anything of interest' which in due course might warrant further investigation.

Are people who have reached the top different from those who have not?

Sample

For the first study we selected two groups from our database; 'managers of managers' i.e. senior managers, and 'managers/supervisors.' The sample sizes were 899 'managers of managers' and 668 'managers/supervisors'. The gender split in the total sample was 14% women and 86% men. The managers in the sample were drawn from a wide range of industry sectors including utilities, telecommunications, financial services, engineering, manufacturing, and professional legal and accounting practices. All of the managers were from international companies. The managers were from a wide range of functions including Finance, Operations, Sales/Business Development, Engineering/Technical and General Management (i.e. CEOs, Managing Directors, Regional or Divisional Heads). The total sample was 76% British with the remaining 24% comprising a wide range of different nationalities. N.B. Data availability issues meant that the sample for the MBTI™ analysis was only 461.

Results

The analysis was a simple comparison of the two groups. We were looking for significant differences between the two groups on any of the dimensions in the psychometrics.

Conclusion

The results show that 'managers of managers' do significantly differ from 'managers/supervisors' on a number of personality and reasoning dimensions. Broadly, the senior managers are higher on extraversion and drive and lower on neuroticism. In relation to reasoning they are stronger on critical thinking ability. These results are in line with other studies linking the NEO to performance measures. The results are also in line with our experience of assessing senior managers i.e. They are typically brighter, more driven, more assertive, more dependable, more open to others, more intuitive (in MBTI™ terms) and more emotionally balanced.

Are senior managers who have demonstrated consistent career success any different from those who have not?

Sample

For the second study we concentrated on the 'managers of managers' sample only and on those managers whose performance we had observed over a number of years. We then classified them into 2 categories. The first group included those managers where there was clear evidence of a track record of success in one job after another. The second group included managers where there was clear evidence of not having succeeded in some respect e.g. moved out of role prematurely for negative reasons. The criteria were intended to be as 'objective' as possible i.e. classifications based on actual track record rather than on subjective opinions of effectiveness. The sample was a subset of the sample from the previous study and comprised 101 senior managers drawn again from a wide range of sectors, with 12 different functions and 9 different nationalities represented. There were only 3 women in the total sample. Following the classification process the outcome was a group of 51 consistently strong performers and a group of 50 rated as having not succeeded in some respect. The groups were compared using data from the same tests as in the first study.

Results

The results seem to suggest that the successful senior managers stand out in that they are more positive and optimistic about people, have a stronger sense of duty, are interpersonally warmer and are less stress prone. In reasoning terms they are brighter. Again this very much fits our own experience. With regard to drawing any firm and generalisable conclusions caution has to be exercised given that the sample is a small selected sample within an already selected sample.

Discussion

So have the psychometrics revealed the qualities which discriminate between those who succeed at senior levels and those who do not? We think not. So what does predict success? Our experience and other preliminary research we have conducted suggests that the real performance discriminators at senior levels lie in the area of motivation - specific patterns of motivation, over and above drive to achieve, which are necessary for responding positively to the demands and environment particular to the job, transformational thinking - the ability to reframe a situation so it is perceived from a completely new angle, cognitive style - the particular way reasoning ability is applied in practice i.e. not just intellectual power, and the development of specific management schema. Ultimately, we believe that the personality traits and reasoning abilities which showed some discrimination in our studies, matter and need to be present and therefore should be measured. However, in addition we believe that for senior manager and high flyer assessment it is critical to assess the factors described above as well. ■