

Academic and Business Leaders Agree: Six Skills Essential for Effective Management

Kaci Deauquier Sheridan
Lamar University

Krystal Hinerman
Lamar University

J. Vincent Nix
West Texas A&M University

Enrique R. Venta
Lamar University

This study surveyed 632 business and public education mid-level managers to ascertain both the importance of and their confidence in using six research-based management competencies. Both groups rated the six as equally or highly valuable; however, educational managers valued conflict resolution more than business counterparts. The education group reported less confidence using their skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and strategic planning. While both groups perceived most of the six competencies as equally valuable, the two groups did not feel similarly confident using the skills. Participants' ratings of skill-importance did not predict their level of confidence using the skills.

Keywords: educational management, education administration, middle management, management skills

ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS LEADERS AGREE: SIX SKILLS ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT

Every organization relies on mid-level personnel to function effectively. This requires two closely related, but different competencies: *leadership* and *management*. The former has more to do with inspiring peers and subordinates, engaging them with the task at hand. *Management*, on the other hand, is necessary for delegating tasks, adhering to deadlines, and the nuts-and-bolts minutiae of project management. A successful administrator must strike a delicate balance between the two areas of competency in order to succeed. Those in middle-management roles have a unique position in which they are staged between the top tier of the organization and those responsible for day-to-day operations (Mintzberg, 1998), and thus find themselves in need of both managerial and leadership skills. However, discussions regarding the skills they “should” possess, what they actually do, and what they need can be contradictory (Harding, et al.,

2014). This study sought to find out, straight from middle managers, what skills they felt were important to their work and how confident they were in utilizing each of those six management skills.

Literature Review

Contemporary researchers state that managers are asked to do everything. Managers are responsible for strategic planning, implementing organizational policy, and setting goals. They are tasked with creating a positive working climate, building strong teams, and motivating, developing, and coaching employees. And above all, they must communicate effectively (Iqbal, et al., 2015; Sukoco, et al., 2022). With mid-level personnel expected to execute so many key tasks, it is vital to effectively prepare individuals for such positions.

Individuals assigned to mid-level administrative positions must be prepared to either manage or lead, depending on the situation. Being able to accommodate this type of flexible role shifting requires an equally flexible mindset. Education and ongoing training programs for leadership positions should be designed for this purpose; however, there is no current standard for training and developing middle managers (Corbett, 2020). In public education, as in the business world, mid-level administrators struggle to find the balance between leading and managing (Harris, et al., 2019). The ambiguity of their role, coupled with the challenges they face and their own skill deficits, has led many managers to default to focusing on the tasks they feel they can do well—which are not necessarily the ones most beneficial to the team or achieving its goals (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Harding, 1991).

Carreras, et al. (2018) defined management skills as abilities an individual possesses which allow them to lead a team to effectively fulfill assigned tasks (Carreras, et al., 2018). While there is no agreed-upon best practices for developing and training middle managers (Corbett, 2020), there has been significant research exploring the skills needed for success in this role. In both the business and public-education fields, key identified skills are effective communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, strategic planning, time management, and teambuilding (Ng & Szeto, 2016; Mestry & Grobler, 2004; Murphy, 1994; Peterson, 2001; King Rice, 2010; Salazar, 2007).

Regardless of the industry, middle managers can find it difficult to simultaneously be an effective manager and an inspiring leader. People in these positions are often chosen because they have strong people skills in addition to expertise and experience in the field. However, these individuals often struggle because their new role is complex, often including managing budgets, resources, and projects – all while offering effective inspirational leadership (Kieran, MacMahon, & MacCurtain, 2020). These expansive expectations do not necessarily match their abilities (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). In addition to addressing their own development, many of those in middle management positions are also responsible for succession planning of their team members which often involves complex development plans, business or department development, and more (Luthra & Dahiya, 2015). This can lead to a loop where difficulties arise from poor understanding of managerial skills needed have to lead to insufficient training for middle managers; leaving those in that position feeling unprepared, inadequate, and unsuccessful (Hao & Yazdanifard, 2015). Weakened by these compounded hierarchical leadership deficits, organizations' often struggle with pivoting, changing focus and adapting to change (Sukoco, et al., 2022). Often all of these responsibilities and resulting challenges are put upon middle managers with little to no preemptive skill development to be successful in the role (Corbett, 2020).

Defining and developing adequate cross-sector middle-management training is not a new endeavor. In 1991, Harding conducted a research study evaluating how educational and business middle-management personnel are trained. Remarkably, findings showed while 81% of those in business-related fields received direct training in management skills, only 53% of school administrators did. A particularly salient finding showed educators who did receive leadership training were not encouraged to do so by their organizations, but rather proactively and independently sought out training for themselves. This reveals a potential fundamental lack of understanding in the educational sector that leadership quality has a significant impact on the workplace environment (Chandrasekar, 2011) and project success greatly depends on managerial ability (Covey, 2004).

In today's schools, administrators act as school managers, instructional leaders, and reformers. There is a widely held perception that these mid-level school administrators have infinite decision-making power, with the freedom—and skills—to make sweeping changes at will (Buckner-Capone, 2019); however, that is simply not the case. Those in campus-leadership roles are bound by district, state, and federal guidelines while also limited by their own underdeveloped skillsets. Kaplan and Taylor (2000) found that principals had limited power to set policy and often felt they were unable to influence school results. King Rice (2010) found administrators are often engaged in a wide variety of daily tasks, spending 50% of their time on management or administrative duties related to compliance, personnel and scheduling, or budget matters. The growing trend of having educational leaders split their focus between academic and administrative duties means that principals often find themselves in an unenviable position, trying to effect 21st-century standards for student development while simultaneously attempting to meet externally imposed productivity benchmarks akin to those traditionally used by corporate entities (Farver & Holt, 2015). A clear conflict arises when these individuals are in charge of ensuring educational benchmarks are met, meeting student and staff needs, and also having to meet externally determined productivity benchmarks. These often-conflicting priorities result in administrators struggling to maintain the balance between executive leadership (i.e., setting policy and directing personnel) and more ordinary managerial tasks such as ensuring compliance. Regardless of setting, effective leadership is assessed through others' performance. In public education, externally derived performance metrics often reflect a lack of understanding regarding the limited nature of educational administrators' authority and autonomy.

While quite a bit of research defines the skills necessary to manage effectively (Harding, et al., 2014; King Rice, 2010; Mestry & Grobler, 2004; Murphy, 1994; Ng & Szeto, 2016; Peterson, 2001; Salazar, 2007), research investigating the day-to-day needs of managers has not been as fully developed (Harding, et al., 2014). Furthermore, there has been little investigation into how much management roles overlap between the education and business sectors and what could potentially be gained by sharing resources (Harding, 1991). This study sought to determine whether or not those in education and business sector middle management positions have similar perceptions regarding the importance of six key management skills and their level of confidence in using those skills on a daily basis. The following research questions were addressed:

- What is the perceived importance of six specific management skills in the day-to-day work of middle managers?
- What is the reported level of confidence in utilizing each of the six management skills by middle managers?

Methodology

The research study employed descriptive exploratory analysis (Creswell, 2015) to compare business and education middle managers' reported perceptions of the importance of and confidence in using six specific management skills.

Sample

The participants were managers and supervisors who were responsible for evaluating five or more direct reports. A non-probability convenient sampling method was used to solicit responses, using online forums such as social media (i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter) that targeted specific groups with members likely to meet our inclusion criteria. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed, as we encouraged those who had completed the survey to share it with others who qualified to participate. Further candidates were solicited through a local university and direct contact with various business owners. The survey was open for one month, to ensure the highest number of responses possible, after which the link was removed from internet forums. A total of 632 individuals completed the survey, of whom 100 were business managers and 532 were public school principals or assistant principals. The overwhelming majority of participants (85%) were female.

Notably, there was a very different distribution of management experience between educators and those in business. The business-group participants were relatively evenly spread between new and experienced

managers with roughly 20% of participants in each experience group from 0-20+ years. While in the school-district group, 47% had been in leadership roles for five or fewer years, and just 2.8% of them had more than 20 years of experience versus 17.4% of those in the business group. Most business managers were from small (34%) and medium-sized (35%) companies, while principals and assistant principals were mostly from small (43%) or large (34%) districts.

Instrumentation

In order to measure the importance and confidence in using the six management skills, we developed a survey using a three-phase process. Phase one involved researching and evaluating existing management skills surveys (King Rice, 2010; Mestry & Grobler, 2004; Murphy, 1994; Ng & Szeto, 2016; Peterson, 2001; Salazar, 2007). Most surveys found included 60 – 150 questions with language that was specific to one industry or the other but not easily translatable across both business and public education groups. In phase two, six management skills were chosen based on the frequency with which managers from both settings identified them as important to their work. Table 1 defines the six key management competencies measured for this study. Phase three involved review by a panel of ten experts, five each from sector. The expert panel helped vet potential survey questions and establish content validity. Over several months researchers met with these individuals six times, receiving valuable feedback on elements such as the style of questioning, phrasing, versatility, level of understanding across settings, and ease of use. The final two-part survey included 12 Likert scale items with 6 items measuring level of importance and 6 items measuring confidence in utilizing the six key management competencies.

**TABLE 1
DEFINITION OF SIX KEY MANAGEMENT SKILLS**

Effective Communication	The ability to express information in a way that considers the audience and nature of the information whereby a successfully delivered intended message is received and understood among parties (Office, 2013).
Conflict Resolution	The process of facilitating the resolution of disputes or disagreements so that parties reach an agreeable compromise (Shonk, 2022).
Team Building	Ability to identify and motivate individuals to form a sustainable team that works effectively together and achieves their goals (Nishii & Mayer, 2009).
Time Management	The organized and significance-based distribution of one’s time (Patton and Pratt, 2002).
Strategic Planning	A systematic process where a created vision is translated into goals, objectives, and a sequence of steps designed to achieve it (Office, 2013).
Problem Solving	Process of working through a challenge (utilizing available resources) and weighing options and solutions to find a positive and workable solution (Office, 2013).

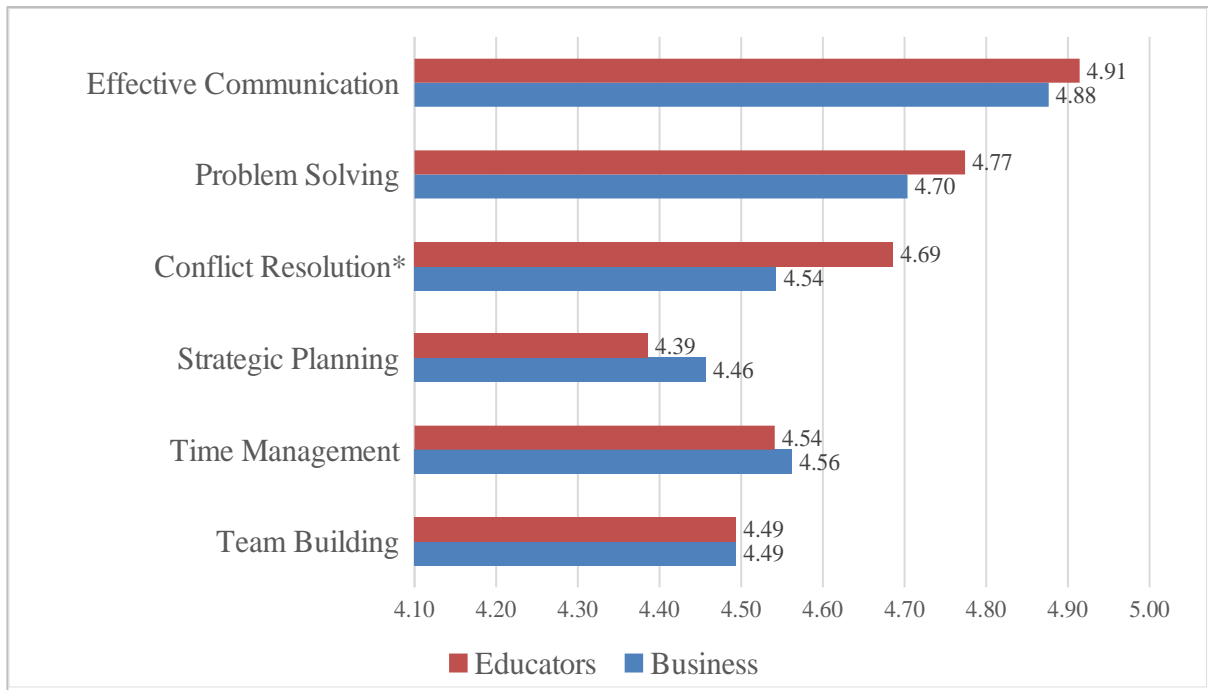
Results

Responses to each Likert-scale survey item were averaged, then examined for each group independently, using descriptive statistics to determine the levels of importance and confidence reported by participants. Independent samples t-tests were also conducted determine if there was a statistically significant mean difference between the business and education groups (Creswell, 2015).

Importance of Management Skills

Overall, participants rated all six managerial skills as being important to executing their day-to-day responsibilities. The survey prompt specifically asked participants to answer: In your work, how important are the following skills? Participants were then rated each of the six management skills from 1 = not important to 5 = very important. Figure 1 illustrates the average reported importance level of each management skill for both groups. The highest average rating for both groups was for Effective Communication ($M_E = 4.9, SD = 0.48; M_B = 4.87, SD = 0.33$), and the lowest for Strategic Planning ($M_E=4.39, SD=0.75; M_B = 4.46, SD =0.71$).

FIGURE 1
IMPORTANCE OF MANAGEMENT SKILLS: MEAN SCORE DIFFERENCES



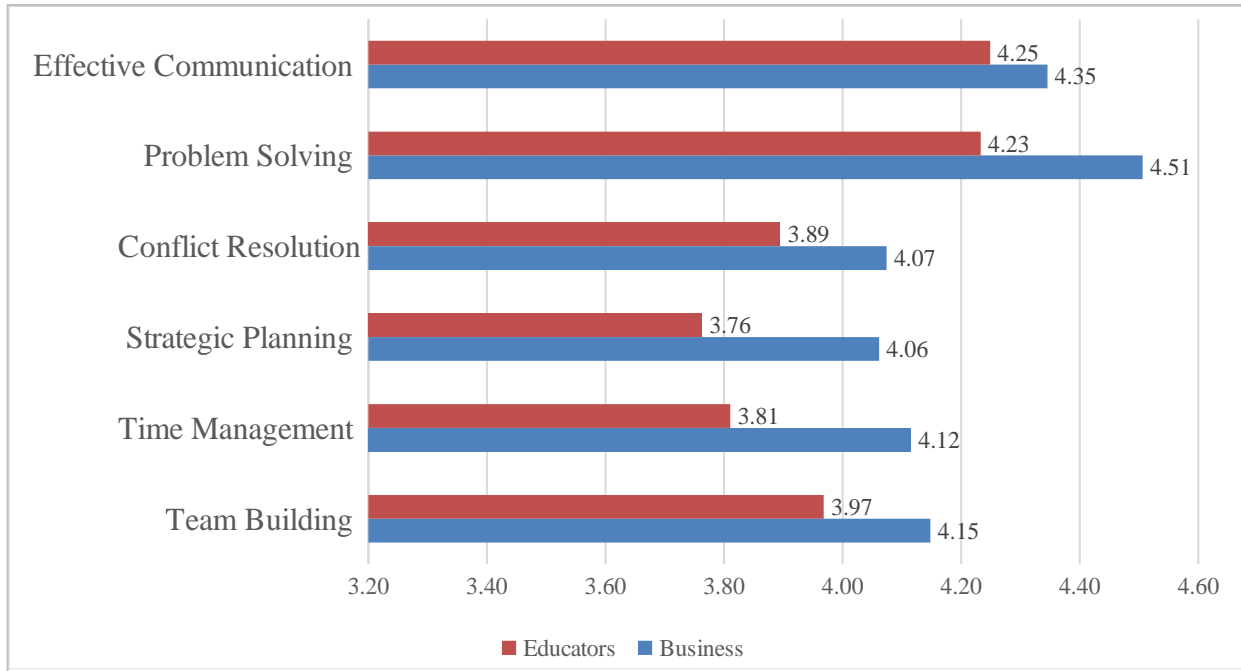
When comparing mean differences, only Conflict Resolution showed a statistically significant difference ($df = 544, p = 0.002$, Cohen's $d = 0.2$) with educators reporting higher importance ($M_E=4.69, SD=0.57$) than the business group ($M_B= 4.54, SD=0.80$). For the other five key management competencies, there were no statistically significant group mean differences meaning both groups report similar importance levels.

Confidence in Management Skills

Varying levels of confidence were reported across all six management skills in response to the following survey prompt: In your work how confident area you in your abilities in the following skills? Participants rated each of the six management skills from 1=not confident and 5 = very confident. Descriptive analyses show managers across both settings reported high levels of confidence on all six skills. On average, respondents felt the most confident in Problem Solving ($M_B = 4.51, SD = 0.63; M_E = 4.23, SD = 0.711$) and Effective Communication ($M_B = 4.35, SD=0.65; M_E = 4.25, SD = 0.70$), and least capable in Time Management ($M_B = 4.12, SD=1.03; ME = 3.81, SD = 0.92$). Three of the six skills showed statistically significant differences between the groups (see Fig. 2). Of those, Problem-Solving had the greatest mean difference ($M_B = 4.51, SD = 0.63; M_E = 4.25, SD = 0.711; p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.4, df = 548$). Statistically significant differences were also found in the reported confidence levels of Conflict Resolution ($M_B = 4.07,$

SD = 0.78; $M_E = 3.89$, $SD = 0.82$; $p = 0.003$, Cohen's $d = 0.2$, $df = 544$) and Strategic Planning ($M_B = 4.06$, $SD = 0.84$; $M_E = 3.76$, $SD = 0.87$; $p = 0.003$, Cohen's $d = 0.4$, $df = 547$).

FIGURE 2
DIFFERENCES IN IMPORTANCE AND CONFIDENCE BETWEEN GROUPS



Discussion

Effective management can sustain and transform the culture of an organization by establishing or reinforcing beliefs, shared values, practices, and norms within organizations. The role of a manager, which blends managerial and leadership skills, is often misunderstood and misrepresented, both in education and in the business world (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). As a result, efforts to develop managerial skills are often splintered, unfocused, and lack direction (Gillard, 2009). The current literature lacks specificity regarding which skills leaders are confidently using on a regular basis. Business and educational managers operate within similar roles and utilize similar management skills, even though their settings and environments are vastly different (Harding, 1991). This research was designed to explore and compare how business and educational managers value specific management skills in their day-to-day roles along with their relative confidence in using those skills. Identifying important skills and measuring reported competence can help evaluate the appropriateness of current training methods with an eye to recognizing which changes would most help develop more effective and competent managers.

Our results piece together an interesting picture regarding importance of managerial skills. Both groups of managers agreed that all six skills are important to the work that they do and attributed the highest value to effective communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution. On average, both groups indicated effective communication was the most important skill. And while both groups agreed that problem-solving was important, educators gave significantly more weight to conflict resolution than the business leaders did. This difference could be due to a variety of factors. In a school, principals and assistant principals spend a large portion of their time resolving conflicts between students, parents, and staff members (Lavigne, et al., 2016; Mestry & Grobler, 2002; 2004), while leaders in the business setting report fewer opportunities to exercise that skill and may have other departments, such as human resources, to support them when conflict arises (Wang & Wu, 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that public-educational leaders rate conflict resolution as highly important to their work.

In addition to importance, we also captured levels of confidence. Research has shown that the more confident a leader is in their skills, the more likely their organization or group will be successful (Hao & Yazdanifard, 2015); when leaders are less sure of their ability to manage successfully, they often adopt negative leadership styles that can be harmful to an organization (Harris & Jones, 2018). We found that leaders in both settings felt most confident in effective communication and problem solving, while they felt least confident in their ability to manage their time effectively. For problem solving, there was a difference between the groups with the educators feeling markedly less sure than the business group. This could be, in part, due to the types of problems respondents were called upon to solve. Those in business settings are called upon to solve problems of a different nature and have a different immediacy of need than those in education (Harding, 1991). Principals and assistant principals are often called to deal with crisis situations on their campuses (i.e., student with a gun, fights between students, staff members out on leave and no one to cover classes, etc.), and as a result, tend to have a more reactive and immediate style of problem-solving (Lavigne, et al., 2016). The business and education groups also reported different levels of confidence in using strategic planning skills. This difference could be due to differences in training and also the objectives of the organization. Educators' lower levels of confidence in strategic planning could be due to lack of formal training. In addition, Sargsyan, et al. (2020) show that in the absence of clear financial goals, managers of not-for-profit organizations and in public education engage in less strategic planning and often see the future of their organizations as better than the data would suggest.

Limitations and Future Research

The convenience sampling method means data used in this study may not be generalizable across all business and education organizations and demographics. Future research could modify the sampling method to ensure a more representative sample across groups.

For problem-solving and strategic planning, we found statistically significant differences in reported confidence between groups. Future research could evaluate the different problems faced by business and educational leaders with the purpose of identifying strategies that could be shared between the groups. As educational leaders continue to be compared to business leaders, the impact profit motive (or the lack thereof) has must be considered and researched further. In particular, it would be wise to research how this skill is actually used in the education and non-profit sectors, and how it could be further developed within those environments.

Conclusion

Effective leadership requires both confidence and competence; when these elements are present, improvement, innovation, and collaboration follow (Sinek, 2009). This study was important to begin exploration into understanding the similarities and differences of middle managers in both sectors. Middle managers in both public education and business agree that all six skills are integral to their work; however, they report differing levels of confidence when using them in their day-to-day work. It is vital that policy makers in both business and public education settings consider the needs of their managers and provide targeted training that will meet those needs while looking to provide ongoing skill set development. Without continued targeted management development and focused skill building, managers can become less effective, and as a result, the organization will fail to thrive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express gratitude to Mr. Demian Pedone for English copyediting.

REFERENCES

- Anicich, E.M., & Hirsh, J.B. (2017, March 22). Why being a middle manager is so exhausting. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved December 20, 2022, from <https://hbr.org/2017/03/why-being-a-middle-manager-is-so-exhausting>

- Buckner-Capone, A. (2019). *Superintendent Beliefs About the Assessment and Use of School Climate Data for Continuous Improvement* [Ed.D., San Jose State University]. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2284210978/abstract/19E97907076B4617PQ/1>
- Carreras, A.B.L., Arroyo, J.C., & Blanco, J.E.E. (2018). Influence of the strategic planning and the management skills as factors internal business competitiveness of SMEs. *Contaduria y Administracion*, 63(3), 1–20. doi:10.22201/fca.24488410e.2018.1085
- Chandrasekar, K. (2011). Workplace environment and its impact on organisational performance in public sector organisations. *International Journal of Enterprise Computing and Business Systems*, 1(1), 1–19.
- Corbett, S. (2020). Establishing professional expectations in further education middle management: The human resource manager's perspective. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, pp. 1–17. doi.org/10.1177/1741143220957328
- Covey, S. (2004). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. Free Press: New York, NY.
- Creswell, J.W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Pearson: Boston, MA.
- Farver, A.R., & Holt, C.R. (2015). Value of coaching in building leadership capacity of principals in urban schools. *Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research*, 2(2), 67–76.
- Gillard, S. (2009). Soft skills and technical expertise of effective project managers. *Issues in Informing Science & Information Technology*, 6, 723–730.
- Gjerde, S., & Alvesson, M. (2020). Sandwiched: Exploring role and identity of middle managers in the genuine middle. *Human Relations*, 73(1), 124–151. DOI: 10.1177/0018726718823243
- Hao, M., & Yazdanifard, R. (2015). How effective leadership can facilitate change in organizations through improvement and innovation. *Global Journal of Management and Business Research, Administration, and Management*, 15(9), version 1.
- Harding, C. (1991). Training for middle management in education and industry. *School Organisation*, 11(1), 99–114.
- Harding, N., Lee, H., & Ford, J. (2014). Who is the middle manager? On constituting an organizational self. *Human Relations*, 67(10), 1213–1237.
- Harris, A., & Jones M. (2018). The dark side of leadership and management. *School Leadership and Management*, 38(5), 475–477. doi:10.1080/13632434.2018.1509276
- Harris, A., Jones, M., Ismail, N., & Nguyen, D. (2019). Middle leaders and middle leadership in schools: Exploring the knowledge base (2003-2017). *School Leadership and Management*, 39(3–4), 255–277. DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1578738
- Iqbal, N., Anwar, S., & Haider, N. (2015). Effect of leadership style on employee performance. *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review*, 5(5), 146. doi:10.4172/2223-5833.1000146
- Kaplan, K., & Taylor, M. (2000). *District approaches to developing and supporting leadership: Case studies of three districts*. Mid-continent research for education and learning.
- Kieran, S., MacMahon, J., & MacCurtain, S. (2020). Strategic change and sensemaking practice: Enabling the role of the middle manager. *Baltic Journal of Management*, 15(4), 493–514. <https://doi.org/10.1108/BJM-11-2018-0395>
- King Rice, J. (2010) *Principal Effectiveness and Leadership in an Era of Accountability: What Research Says*. (722272011-001). American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/e722272011-001>
- Lavigne, H.J., Shakman, K., Zweig, J., Greller, S.L., Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast Islands (ED), Education Development Center, I. (EDC), & National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (ED). (2016). *Principals' time, tasks, and professional development: An analysis of schools and staffing survey data*. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2017201.pdf

- Luthra, A., & Dahiya, R. (2015). Effective leadership is all about communicating effectively: Connecting leadership and communication. *International Journal of Management & Business Studies, IJMBS*, 5(3), 43–48.
- Mestry, R., & Grobler, B. (2002). The training and development of principals in the management of educator. *International Studies in Educational Administration (ISEA)*, 30(3), 21–34.
- Mestry, R., & Grobler, B. (2004). The training and development of principals to manage schools effectively using the competence approach. *International Studies in Educational Administration (ISEA)*, 32(3), 2–19.
- Mintzberg, H. (1998). Covert leadership: Notes on managing professionals. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(6), 140–147.
- Murphy, J. (1994). Transformational change and the evolving role of the principal: Early empirical evidence. In J. Murphy, & K.S. Louis (Eds.), *Reshaping the Principalship: Insights from Transformational Change Efforts*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED374520>
- Ng, S., & Szeto, S. (2016). Preparing school leaders: The professional development needs of newly appointed principals. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(4), 540–557. DOI: 10.1177/1741143214564766
- Nishii, L.H., & Mayer, D.M. (2009). Do inclusive leaders help to reduce turnover in diverse groups? The moderating role of leader–member exchange in the diversity to turnover relationship. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(6), 1412–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017190>
- Office, U.S.G.A. (2013). *Managing for Results: Agencies Have Elevated Performance Management Leadership Roles, But Additional Training Is Needed*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Patton, D., & Pratt, C. (2002). Assessing the training needs of high-potential managers. *Public Personnel Management*, 31(4), 465–484.
- Peterson, K. (2001). *The professional development of principals: Innovations and opportunities*. National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED459533>
- Salazar, P.S. (2007). The professional development needs of rural high school principals: A seven-state study. *Rural Educator*, 28(3), 20–27. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ783878.pdf>
- Sargsyan, G., Venta, E.R., Escamilla, C., Rumsey, H. & Gibbs, J. (2020). The value of strategic planning for small non-profit organizations. *Journal of Management and Marketing Research*, 24(1–10).
- Shonk, K. (2022). *What is Conflict Resolution, and How Does It Work? PON - Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School*. Retrieved December 20, 2022, from <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/conflict-resolution/what-is-conflict-resolution-and-how-does-it-work/>
- Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. New York: Portfolio. Retrieved December 20, 2022, from <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy1004/2009021862-b.html>
- Sukoco, B., Lestari, Y., Susanto, E., Nasution R., & Usman, I. (2022). Middle manager capabilities and organization performance: the mediating effect of organizational capacity for change. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 71(4), 1365–1384. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPPM-07-2019-0364>
- Wang, N., & Wu, G. (2020). A Systematic Approach to Effective Conflict Management for Program. *SAGE Open*, 10(1), 215824401989905. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019899055>
- Wang, N., & Wu, G. (2020). A systematic approach to effective conflict management for program. *SAGE Open*, 10(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019899055>