INTRODUCTION

If you are engaged in learning to be an educator, such as working on a college degree in the field or taking professional development courses to improve your competencies and knowledge, then you subconsciously believe in the premises of the skills approach.

Like the trait approach discussed in Chapter 2, the skills approach takes a leader-centered perspective on leadership. However, the skills approach shifts from a focus on personality characteristics, which usually are viewed as innate and largely fixed, to an emphasis on skills and abilities that can be learned and developed. Although personality certainly plays an integral role in leadership, the skills approach suggests that knowledge and abilities are also needed for effective leadership.

Skills are what leaders can accomplish, whereas traits are who leaders are (i.e., their innate characteristics). Leadership skills are defined here as the ability to use one’s knowledge and competencies to accomplish a set of goals or objectives. These leadership skills can be acquired, and leaders can be trained to develop them.
There are two distinct approaches when it comes to leadership skills: the early work of Katz (1955), who developed the three-skill approach, and the more recent work of Mumford and his colleagues (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000), who initiated the development of a comprehensive skills model of leadership.

**Three-Skill Approach**

Katz (1955) suggested that effective administration (i.e., leadership) depends on three basic personal skills: technical, human, and conceptual (Figure 3.1).

*Technical skills* are knowledge about and proficiency in a specific type of work or activity. They include competencies in a specialized area, analytical ability, and the ability to use appropriate tools and techniques.

**Figure 3.1 Management Skills Necessary at Various Levels of an Organization**

Human skills are knowledge about and ability to work with *people*. These are the abilities that help a leader to work effectively with followers, peers, and superiors to accomplish the organization’s goals. Leaders with human skills adapt their own ideas to those of others, are able to create an atmosphere of trust, and are sensitive to the needs and motivations of others.

Conceptual skills are the ability to work with abstract ideas and concepts. A leader with conceptual skills is comfortable talking about the ideas that shape an organization and the intricacies involved, putting goals into words, and working with abstractions and hypothetical notions. Conceptual skills are central to creating a vision and strategic plan for an organization because they provide an understanding of what a company stands for and where it is or should be going.

**Skills Model of Leadership**

A second approach to skills leadership developed by Mumford and his colleagues (2000) is more complex than Katz’s paradigm. This model, outlined in Figure 3.2, delineates five components of effective leader
performance: competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences. The leader competencies at the heart of the model are problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge. These competencies are directly affected by the leader’s individual attributes, which include the leader’s general cognitive ability, crystallized cognitive ability, motivation, and personality as well as his or her career experiences and the environment. The model postulates that effective problem solving and performance can be explained by the leader’s basic competencies and that these competencies are in turn affected by the leader’s attributes, experience, and environment.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies provide descriptions of leadership situations in educational settings that can be evaluated from the skills perspective. The first case addresses the skills required by a school district’s after-school program coordinator. In the second case, a panel weighs the different skills of candidates for a coordinator to lead a new college program.

At the end of each case, you will find two sets of questions that will help in analyzing the case. The first set can be answered using information provided in this chapter; the second set, Advanced Questions, provides an opportunity for deeper exploration of the skills approach to leadership and is designed to coincide with the concepts discussed in Chapter 3 of Leadership: Theory and Practice (8th ed., pp. 43–72).
CASE 3.1
BEFORE BARB BURNS OUT

Barb Margolin is the coordinator of after-school programs for 11 elementary schools in Johnson County Public Schools. A former fourth-grade teacher, Barb was thrilled to take the coordinator position. She supervises a team of youth development specialists to plan and implement academic interventions, enrichment programs, student clubs, and other activities for the students to engage in during the three hours immediately following the end of the school day. Barb is responsible for a variety of tasks, including hiring staff, budgeting, curriculum development, developing community partnerships, and grant monitoring. Barb works with individuals at every level of the district, including students, support staff, teachers, and principals, reporting to the assistant vice president of academic services.

Barb had a great first year in the program. The people she worked with liked her, saying she was fun to be around, said yes to every project request, and knew all the students and their family members by name. Barb developed strong working relationships with her colleagues and a positive connection with the school staff. She came up with some creative new activities for the students, and students in the academic intervention programs started showing improvement. Sometimes Barb fell behind on getting paperwork completed and let a deadline for a task slip, but her supervisor and others gave her the benefit of the doubt, recognizing it was her first year in the job and she was learning the position.

Barb's second year as coordinator is not going as well. Paperwork has piled up, and tasks she needs to do are falling through the cracks. Recently, an important deadline for a grant contract was missed, costing the program about $40,000. This is the third time in as many months Barb has missed a deadline. In addition,
several principals have told Barb’s supervisor that Barb seems overwhelmed and unable to follow through on promises she made to them. Barb continues to innovate the program, but several of the changes she instituted this year required more attention from her during their implementation. Hand-holding these changes has taken her energy and attention away from other responsibilities.

Barb’s demeanor has suffered as well. Those who work with her say that she once was very upbeat and positive, but now seems stressed and overwhelmed. She still says yes to every project request, but fewer and fewer projects are actually being completed.

Her supervisor knows Barb brings valuable skills to this position, but must help her develop other needed skills before Barb burns out completely.

Questions

1. Based on Katz’s three-skill approach to leadership (Figure 3.1), how would you describe Barb’s technical, human, and conceptual skills? In which of these is she the strongest?

2. Given the duties and tasks in her position, would you characterize Barb’s job as supervisory, middle, or top management? Which skills does she need to work on in order to perform at that level?

3. Looking at the three components of the skills model of leadership (Figure 3.2), describe Barb’s strongest individual attributes and competencies. How do these relate to the outcomes of her leadership (i.e., effective problem solving and performance)?

4. How does her environment and career experience affect Barb’s leadership?

5. As Barb’s supervisor, how would you work on developing the skill areas she may be lacking?

—Trevor J. Davies
CASE 3.2
PICKING A PROGRAM LEADER

Northern State University’s Department of Student Services’ new Firsts Program is designed to help low-income and first-generation students, as well as those who come from the foster care system, learn to navigate college. The public university created the program after it found that many of its students who come from these backgrounds dropped out of college after their first year.

The department conducted a study with former students from these backgrounds to identify the obstacles that made college difficult for them and discovered that, for many of them, college is an unfamiliar landscape. Things such as how to apply for financial aid (when they don’t have parents with tax returns), balancing school and jobs, and knowing how to access school resources such as email accounts and computers, were completely new to them. One young woman said, “I knew nothing about how to ‘go to college.’ I just showed up at my first class with a pen and notebook and was stunned to find out that everyone had already bought the book and read the first chapter. I didn’t even know where or what the bookstore was.”

Another student, a former foster child, lived in the dorms and was stunned to find out the dorms were closed for three weeks over the holidays: “I didn’t have anywhere to go, so I used every last dime I had to stay at a really crappy hotel. I felt abandoned and embarrassed.”

The Firsts Program will be overseen by a coordinator who will work one-on-one with each student in the program to help him or her succeed. The panel choosing the coordinator has three candidates for the position:

Lucy Wallis has worked in the Department of Student Services for 10 years as an assistant program director. Before that she was a student at the university and worked as a resident adviser in the dorms and as an orientation leader. She is very knowledgeable of the university and
the services it provides. She is also very familiar with faculty, which is a plus when it comes to working with them to help students. Lucy has a good understanding of the university’s bureaucracy—she knows which faculty and staff members to talk to in order to achieve things, but also has a grasp of the unwritten rules of working with the administration. Lucy’s references say she is very likable, with great people skills, and she has always had positive performance evaluations.

Wynter Simmons does not come from within the college. She is a caseworker with the city’s Department of Social Services and works exclusively in cases dealing with child placement. She is a former foster child who has a master’s degree and is working on a doctorate. A graduate of Northern State, she is knowledgeable of many of the services available, but doesn’t have a basic understanding of how to work with college programs and administration. In her interview, Wynter presented a clear direction for the new program, outlining her goals and how she would go about achieving them. Some of her references have said that Wynter can be abrupt and a little abrasive with colleagues, but is nothing but compassionate when working with the children in her caseload. Three of the foster students she has managed are now attending the university, and she is credited with helping them succeed.

Geno Polydorisis also works within the university. He is currently an assistant coach and the student athlete mentor for the Department of Athletics. His job is to work with student athletes to keep up their academics and playing eligibility. Geno is the first in his family to graduate from college; he went to Northern State on scholarship as a running back on the football team. In his interview, Geno explained that many of the student athletes he works with come from situations similar to those in the Firsts Program. Many are first-generation college students, many come from low-income families where college wasn’t ever discussed as a future option, and two were actually homeless before they came to Northern State. Geno has focused on helping the athletes receive extra academic help, teaching them basic life skills like money and time management and working with them to balance schoolwork and athletics. While generally respected, Geno has had a few testy interactions with faculty and staff on
campus who think he asks for special allowances for those he mentors because they are athletes. But the numbers don’t lie: Northern State’s student athletes have higher GPAs and graduation rates than the national average for college athletes.

The head of the selection panel summed up the search this way: “It’s a good problem to have. We have three highly skilled candidates, and the choice won’t be easy.”

Questions

1. Using Katz’s three-skill approach as illustrated in Figure 3.1, compare Lucy, Wynter, and Geno in terms of their technical, human, and conceptual skills. In which skill area is each candidate strongest and weakest?

2. Is one of these skills—technical, human, or conceptual—most important for the Firsts Program coordinator to have? Explain your answer.

Advanced Questions

3. Looking at the three components of the skills model of leadership as illustrated in Figure 3.2, compare Lucy, Wynter, and Geno in terms of their individual attributes and competencies for this job.

4. How would you compare Lucy, Wynter, and Geno in regard to the environment and their career experiences? How do these factors influence their leadership potential?

5. Skills can be learned. What skills do Lucy, Wynter, and Geno each need to learn in order to be successful in the coordinator position?

REFERENCES
