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## **Abilities and competences in leadership: concepts and discussions**

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## **Abilities and competences in leadership: concepts and discussions**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss some essential abilities related to the practice of leadership in organizations and formal or informal groups of work. Firstly, it presents some definitions concerning the theoretical concepts of abilities and competences; then, some essential abilities are presented and applied to the leadership role, in the reference to the human and operations management. The paper is based on a multidisciplinary literature review, involving the areas of knowledge of business management, industrial engineering and pedagogy.

**Key-words:** abilities and competences; competences management; leadership.



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## **Introduction**

The practice of leadership requires a set of inter-related abilities not only for the professional-technical or theoretical training, but also for managing and guiding a number of people seeking common goals. In this article, there is a reflection about the abilities demanded for the role of the human groups manager, being these groups formal or informal, inserted or not in organizations.

Methodologically, a literature review focusing on multidisciplinary is adopted: concepts and ideas applied were developed by the areas of knowledge of business management, industrial engineering and pedagogy. The concepts used in the study were, first, the concepts of ability and competence, subject of analysis of both pedagogy and administration as well as production engineering. Moreover, the concept of leadership is combined to the specific abilities required from a leader.

### **Abilities and competencies: defining concepts**

Several authors note that the concepts of ability and competence, although well rooted in the discourse of many social sectors, such as schools and businesses, do not have a unanimous definition; the theoretical construction is still in process (Fleury and Fleury, 2000, 2004; Dutra, 2001, Vieira and Garcia, 2004; Zacharias, 2008; Garcia, 2008). Sant'anna, Moraes and Kilimnik (2005: 4) add that "the concept of competence is not new. Indeed, it is a considerably old idea, but (re-) conceptual and (re-) assessed in this time [...]".



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Within teaching, national and international institutions have emphasized the concepts of abilities and competencies as guiding of curricular matrixes in basic and higher education. In 1990, UNESCO announced, during the World Conference on Education for All, some abilities that should form the core of educational practice: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live with others and learn to be (Garcia, 2008). The Ministry of Education of Brazil (MEC), in turn, explains the need for the school to develop the area of languages, the understanding of phenomena, the construction of arguments, the solution of problems and the capacity to making proposals (Zacharias, 2008). Moreover, also the leader of teams, groups and environments in education are identified as professionals from whom specific abilities are required. In the case of teacher performance, for example, Silveira (2003) highlights the need for this professional to be able to reflect on the knowledge, to context knowledge conveyed, to induce a broad and critical overview, to work on the construction of knowledge by students, and other abilities.

The term *competence* has its origin in the latin term *competere*, from the combination of *com*, which means *set*, and *petere*, which means *effort* (Rabechini Jr. and Carvalho, 2003). Generally, a competent person is able to do efficiently a determined function. Fleury and Fleury (2000: 19) highlight the dynamic character of competence, which requires “practical intelligence in situations that are based on knowledge acquired and transformed with the more force the more increases the complexity of these situations [...]”. The authors also show, based on Le Boterf, that the notion of having determined competence implies “know how to mobilize, integrate, and



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transfer knowledge, resources and abilities in a given professional context” (Fleury and Fleury, 2000: 20).

Garcia (2008: n/ p.), based in Perrenoud, interprets that “a competence allows a person to mobilize knowledge to face a given situation”. It consists of a dynamic knowledge, which allows flexibility and adaptation of an individual faced with different situations. Competence, therefore, covers a system of knowledge that makes someone able to “develop unique, creative and effective responses for new problems” (Garcia, 2008: n / p.).

Focusing on the delimitation of what are abilities and what are competences, Moretto (*apud* Zacharias, 2008: n/p.) defines that:

*The abilities are associated to know how to do: mental or physical action that shows the capacity acquired. Therefore, to identify variables, to understand phenomena, to relate data, to analyze situations-problems, to synthesize, to judge, to correlate and manipulate [information] are examples of abilities.*

*By other side, competences are a group of abilities harmonically developed and that characterize, as instance, a specific function or job: to be an architect, doctor or chemical teacher. The abilities should be developed focusing the search for the competences.*



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Therefore, the concept of skill is far from theoretical knowledge of a certain specific area of knowledge and is close to the capacity to adapt and to act on a situation. Among the most important abilities detached in the context of organizations and working groups, there are pointed out the capabilities of working in teams, dealing with uncertainties and ambiguities, taking action and decision attitudes, creating, communicating and relationships with people (Richardson *apud* Sant'anna, Moraes and Kilimnik, 2005).

Abilities would be, then, independent components of a particular competence. The verbal ability, for example, constitutes at the same time the competences of advocating, making a religious or political speech and many other actions. Yet, when inserted in given competence, abilities are inter-linked. For example, the ability of leadership complements the ability of communication in case of an enterprise manager. It forms an integrated and systemic whole called management competence, consisting of inter-related skills. The *Congrès Force* (a French worker's institution), according to Vieira and Garcia (2004: 8), "defines competence as a set of knowledge mobilized in the work situation. Its components are the knowledge or expertise, the knowledge put into practice, know-how, skills, intelligence and professional staff", among others.

Thus, a competence is comprised of related abilities, which involves an advanced theoretical knowledge already acquired by the individual. The theoretical knowledge and the abilities constitute, then, a specific competence. This is defined as a set of requirements – knowledge and abilities – urged by the performance of a particular function, which requires the action of the



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individual seeking the solution of certain problems and situations (Sant'anna, Moraes and Kilimnik, 2005). The establishment of a dynamic and flexible power is also noted in the idea of competence, which is reorganized in different contexts, depending, for example, on different requirement levels to perform the same function: "The competence of the individual is not a state, can not be reduced to a specific knowledge or expertise" (Fleury and Fleury, 2004: 48).

Thus, leadership power is founded on knowledge and on practical basis of human resources management, and various abilities, such as learning to know with the group, learning to establish goals and take the led to comply with them, learning to motivate the led. Understanding that the leadership power increases the performance level of groups and organizations (see Fleury and Fleury, 2000; Rabechini and Carvalho Jr., 2003), it can be inferred that the competence of the leader is responsible for a large portion of the final result accomplished by groups or organizations.

### **Abilities of the leader: a proposal**

The abilities of the leader involves a wide range of inter-related actions that he/ she must take as an administrator and manager of human resources and of group strategies for the organization (planning, implementation and evaluation). In this sense, a high level of communication capacity is key to their leadership tasks: motivation, delegation, and assessment of the group (Maximiano, 2006).



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Next, the abilities selected to compose the present study (adapted and expanded from Fleury and Fleury, 2000) are listed. The abilities are focused to the organizational-managerial capability of the leader.

• **A 1: To know how to communicate**

The communicative process is of vital importance to the work of an effective leader in meetings, evaluations and everyday work. Thus, the direction of human groups is closely linked to interpersonal communicative processes. It should be developed, thus, led motivation, group participation, broad exchange of ideas, and attitudes related to inter-subjective conflict resolution. The leader must develop strong communication activity with the group, doing research on the degree of satisfaction with the led and seeking to conduct a participatory management processes, in which there is prevailing consensus.

• **A 2: To know how to act**

The ability to learn to act involves the full understanding of the leader's function and of tasks related to this function. That is, a leader must define which activities are his/her responsibilities in leading the group coordinated. This, however, depends on the formation of the group, for example, if there are sub-leaders among the led. The lower the number of "tasks" among the



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participants of the group, the greater is the leader activity spectrum, from the resolution of interpersonal conflicts to the technique preparation.

The leader-entrepreneur acts as starting point for the organization of her/his group and plans activities, which should include improvements to the organization; she/he identifies the possibilities and opportunities for a consistent strengthening of the group, as the leader-controller of disturbances, acting on a point in unforeseen crises and conflicts. The leader-manager manages time resources, leads the work program, sometimes allows decisions claimed by others, and finally, the leader-dealer acts in situations to make contracts and take joint decisions.

### • A 3: To know how to lead

With regard to human resource management, leadership plays a significant role in organizing and conducting work groups, leading its actions and driving its behavior (Maximiano, 2006). This ability is fundamental to the conduct of a human groups, often heterogeneous. Thus, leadership can be understood as a process of managing human resources, based on foundations of authority, which is structured on tradition, charisma, formal authority, technical expertise and political (interpersonal) relations.

In an analysis of people management it is possible to highlight the typological profile of two leaders: the authoritative and the innovative. While the authoritarian leader seeks only goals implementation, imposing goals and not allowing the group to make suggestions about the work,



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the innovative leader maintains the organization of the group, listens to the ideas of its members and integrates the leadership without making excessive use of authority. Leadership can therefore be exerted in a two-dimensional view, showing an emphasis on people (human resources) or on tasks (products), as outlined by Maximiano (2006).

Besides the resolution of problems in work groups - as the solution and prevention of interpersonal conflicts, which are common in these groups - and of situational leadership (Bergamini, 1988, 1994) - in which the leader makes use of her/his dialogue capabilities, and abilities to the trial and decision -, the following actions can be performed to exert leadership in groups and organizations: defining responsibilities, determining the levels of authority in accordance with the responsibilities, setting standards of excellence, maintaining a technical support that meets the objectives defined, and have continuous assessment on the performance of each led, of the leader and of the group, acknowledge work and achievements; stimulate trust among group members, accept error and motivate for success; treating people with dignity and respect.

• **A 4: To know how to motivate**

So as to be motivated in a social group, the individual must be seen in three interpersonal needs (Schutz, cited by Bergamini, 1988): inclusion, control and affection. When included, the person shall establish and maintain a stable relationship with others, performing material and symbolic



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exchanges that impact on the self and develop their sociability. The need for control, in turn, is to influence the behavior of other people, which makes the person feel important in society, groups or companies. Affection, finally, is an extension of the need for inclusion, i.e. beyond the sense of belonging to the group, the person feels supported by others in psychological terms.

Authors of the human resources management (Kondo, 1994; Chiavenato, 2003; Maximiano, 2006) emphasize the importance of motivation to improve the performance of groups with the achievement of established goals and personal achievement of each participant.

#### • A 5: To have strategic vision

According to Chiavenato (2003: 65), the strategy represents the destination to be followed by a group or organization so that it “can turn consciously and systematically to its objectives, based on realistic analysis and methods of their own conditions and possibilities and the environmental context [...]”. In view of Fleury and Fleury (2000: 25), the strategy requires the professional knowledge of her/his task and of the group, the identification of opportunities and threats, strengths and weaknesses, identification of needs for change, for directing and driving the group to set goals.

In this sense, a leader must first know the limitations and the actual duties and responsibilities of his group, the working hours, the material conditions of work and thus develop appropriate



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strategies. In particular, it's important to the driver of human groups to be able to cope with the pressure coming from the environment outside the group. Thus, hypothetically, a decline in the company productivity leads to instability and susceptibility to unemployment, and employees will express it in the human environment of the working group. Leading the more insecure and less motivated requires developing activities that emphasize the elevation of their self-esteem.

• **A 6: To know how to assume responsibilities**

The ability to face responsibility is closely linked to the leadership and delegation (empowerment) process, as noted by Chiavenato (2003) and Maximiano (2006). Under this angle, it is recommended that the leader clearly delineates the group's responsibilities. Furthermore, a leader must assume that the targets are likely to be affected by the group, and continuously evaluate them more flexibly as necessary, in dialogues with those involved in the activity.

• **A 7: To know how to learn with the led**

Work groups are particularly relevant and unique as they are capable of combining various experiences, training, information, concepts and modes of action, represented by each person. It is, therefore, essential that a leader is able to explore the human and intellectual potential that



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exists in the work group, teaching and learning leadership. In addition to discussions about possible themes intrinsic or extrinsic to the group (such as seminars), democratic activities can be conducted - such as making certain decisions plurally -, strengthening cooperation and the sense of group. Thus, the need for inclusion and participation in the group, leading to the motivation of the led, can be satisfied.

• **A 8: To know how to improve yourself**

Seeking the best professional development, a leader must be able to identify weaknesses in her/his training and constantly seek to acquire new knowledge to implement the work, reflecting on positive results to the led and to the organization. The new knowledge should also motivate her/him to grow both as a person and a professional. In this sense, professional qualification can permeate some specific areas of management, either through participation in refresher training or seminars or in the search for intensifying academic researches and for reaching more degrees.

• **A 9: To know how to commit**

The engagement of the leader involves his ability to establish objective goals and take the led to its performance, i.e. the professional must be aware about the exact objectives outlined by the organization in which the working group is, the formation of the group and results to be achieved.



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The leader must have intellectual and emotional capacity to be the legitimate representative of that group and to assume command and correct any errors that may have been committed. Also, there should be an outline planning for quality that can be obtained by working with a group at a given period of time.

• **A 10: To know how to stimulate the creativity of the group**

One of the attitudes that is correlated to motivation is the stimulus for creative activity, which has been increasingly a phenomenon related to human groups (De Masi, 2003). With the encouragement of creativity in leadership, one can develop different activities, such as group games and other creative strategies (activities for relaxation). It is encouraged, therefore, “the spontaneity and impulsiveness of people [...] [making them] play with ideas and elements, juxtaposing them and combining them in unusual, unexpected and funny ways” (Wechsler , 1993: 73). Creativity would, therefore, stimulate the performance of various mental structures, schemas, systems, functions, working within the group framework for improving the abilities of leadership and the leader and in the led.



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• **A 11: To know how to mobilize material resources**

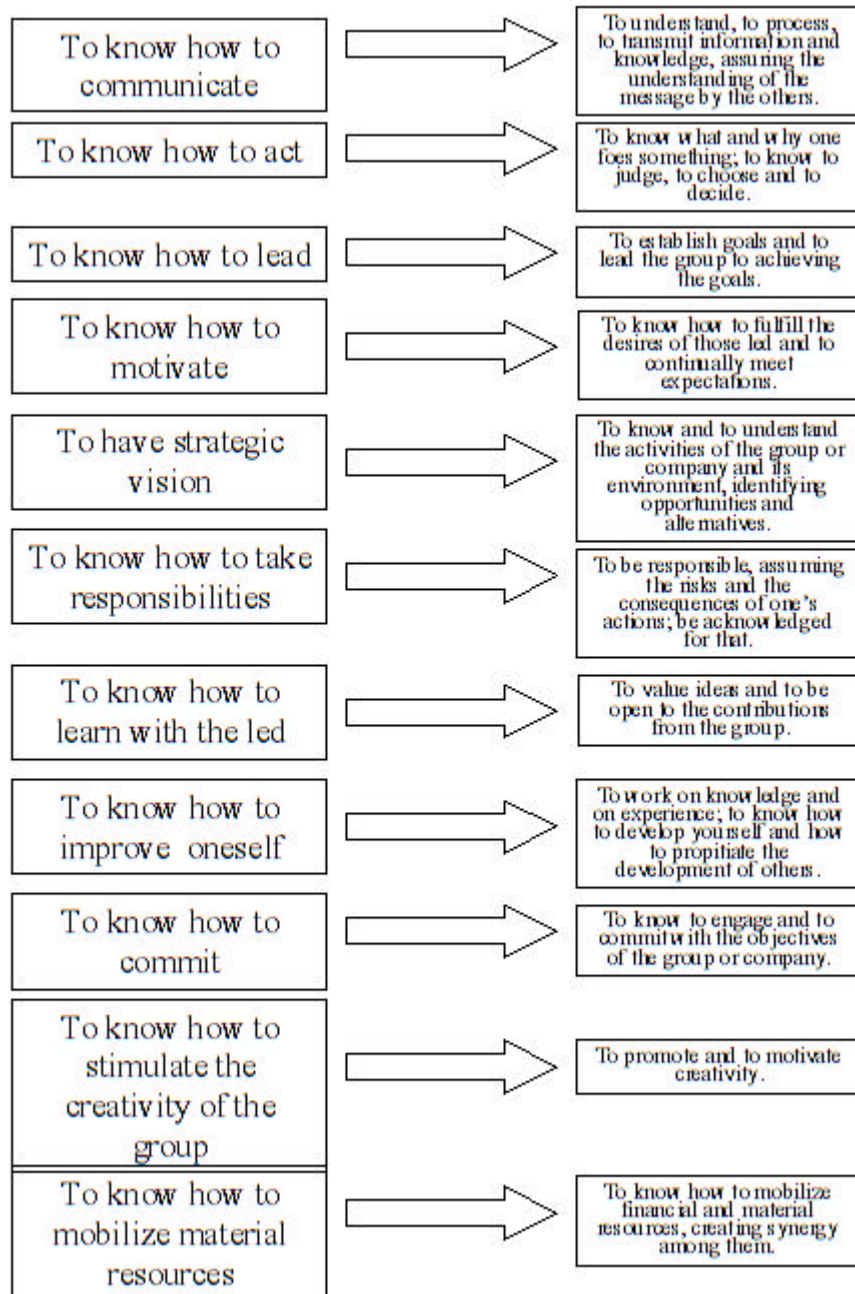
The bargaining power, the organizational competence and the capacity to warrant material infrastructure (Fleury and Fleury, 2000) are eminently present in the leadership work sphere and particularly highlights the role of management in leadership. Besides learning to communicate and to defend the group's interests and goals, the leader is often required to have a high level of social capital, i.e. the establishment of a dense network of contacts to enable the mobilization of material support to the group.

**The organizational-managerial abilities of a leader**

In order to synthesize the concepts for each ability set, we present a conceptual framework on the concepts of the organizational-managerial abilities of the leader.



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**Figure 1 – The organizational-managerial abilities of a leader**

Source: adapted by the authors, from Fleury and Fleury (2000, p. 23)



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## Final remarks

The abilities of the leader related to work organization and administration of human resources are significantly valued by the participants of work groups. Thus, the establishment of goals and roles in the creation, work and (re) production is essential for the efficiency of collective groups. It is worth noting that this process can only be achieved by the union of all around common goals, thus requiring the performance of a leader who combines his authority to a process of participatory management and gets the desired results from his leadership, for which motivation is the key to generate interest in and commitment to the activities.

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