

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES OF SME LEADERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Small and medium industries (SMEs) constitute backbone of any active economy. Flourishing despite a challenging environment, the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) of India have survived several highs and lows in the past few years. With the Indian economy emerging as one of the leading economies in the world. It is expected that by 2025 it will become a \$5 trillion economy. And major attention is being given to strengthen the SME sector which is backbone of Indian economy. As per MSME annual report there are 3.6 crore SMEs in India employing more than 8 crore people contributing 37 % of GDP¹(It is therefore important to give special attention towards leadership development and support SME leaders. However, Competency development is challenge by itself as SME leaders are neither exposed to and nor are inclined towards development activities at the same time the variation in nature of job leads to need for different competencies. By going through in depth interview of 15 SME owner leaders we provide a critical analysis of competencies of SME leaders. Such analysis will help in developing more relevant interventions for SME leaders.

Keywords: Leadership competency development, SME, SME leadership

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Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in the growth of the economy. According to Perry (Perry, 2001) and Beaver (Beaver, 2003) if business failures are analysed, the major cause would be poor leadership practices. Leadership development of SMEs needs to focus on those capabilities that are practiced by SME leaders. The literature references related to competency frameworks elaborate various competencies as the behaviours exhibited by successful leaders in the corporate world. But, these frameworks do not represent the competencies demonstrated by SME leaders/owners. So, the first important question is – What are the competencies that are practiced most by SME leaders? Another related question is – is there any difference in the competencies development in various groups of SMEs? And how could we steer our efforts for better development of leadership competencies.

A detailed qualitative study of competencies of SME leaders was undertaken to explore these questions. The interviews also elaborated interesting context of people development and challenges in people development and the study thus helps to develop more relevant and useful interventions for SME leaders. The findings of this study are presented here

Theory and concepts

Competency

In this paper, we focus on competency as a personal attribute. It should not be confused with the term ‘Core competency’ which is often used in the context of strategy of an organization.

We find various definitions of competency; for example, as specified by Hornby and Thomas – “Competency is the ability to perform effectively the functions associated with management in a work situation” (Hornby & Thomas, 1989). Competency - underlying characteristic of an individual that is casually related to superior performance in a job’ Boyatzis (Boyatzis R. , 1982) (Boyatzis R. E., 2008) The definitions of competency clearly highlight few words such as “Ability”, “action” and “Superlative performance”

There are various references related to various competencies that are claimed to be required by scholars as well as corporates

Personal effectiveness and attitude competencies are the competencies such initiative, self-confidence as well as cognitive capabilities (Boyatzis R. , 1982)(Man & Lau, 2000)

Work place related competencies include managing self, working in team and managing personal growth (Leslie, 2009), (Gholipur, Mahmoodi, Jandaghi, & Fardmanesh, 2012)(LeBrasseur, Blanco, & Dodge, 2002)

Industry specific or job specific competencies are related to technical or functional competence. (Ennis, 2008)

Competencies related to operations and result are typically management oriented competencies such as operations management, decision making, managing people etc. (Industry Canada, 2003)(Capaldo, Iandoli, & Ponsiglione, 2004)

Competencies related to relationship management includes competencies such as communication, networking, conflict management etc. (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 1999)(Capaldo, Iandoli, & Ponsiglione, 2004)

Competencies related to workforce development included competencies such as participative management, people development (Leslie, 2009)(Sherron, 2000)(Winterton, 2002) where as Competencies related to self-development included competencies such as self-awareness and self-management(Yukl, 2001)(Ramo & Saris, 2009)

Competencies related to future of the business included competencies like developing vision, strategy development and change management. (Hayton & Kelley, 2006)(Vecchio, 2003)(Man & Lau, 2000)

Competency Frameworks

The competency framework is often used in corporates to identify, evaluate, and groom leaders. There are various references that elaborate competency models referred to and used by corporates (Bolden, Gosling, Marturano, & Dennison, 2003), (Ennis, 2008).

Various references in scholarly publications elaborate leadership competencies. Bolden et.al (Bolden, Gosling, Marturano, & Dennison, 2003) states Zenger Miller Grass-Roots Leadership Model, whereas R G Hamlin has attempted to define a universalistic model. Boyatzis elaborates a model that has five main clusters(Boyatzis R. , 1982). The leadership gap study conducted by Jean Leslie(Leslie, 2009) elaborates a framework of 20 competencies that were used to identify the gaps in expected and actual performancesfor the present period as well for the future.

SME leaders' competencies

We are particularly interested in the competencies required by SME leaders. As Heneman etal. have indicated“Current human resource theory is often developed and tested in large organizations. Thus, little is known about the extent to which the theory extends to smaller entrepreneurial organizations.”(Heneman, Tansky, & Camp, 2000).

Various studies have tried to identify competencies in SMEs such as Industry Canada(2003), European Commission (2003), Hill (2001), etc.

However, it has been observed that the competency clusters arrived at, which wasbased on theory reference and empirical data, differed significantly (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 1999). Hence, in this study a grounded list of competencies was arrived at by analysing the interviews and this list was then further analysed.

Methodology

Method

We used semi structured interviews to collect data. In-depth interviewsof owner-leaderswere conducted at theirrespective offices. Since the interviewswereabout behaviours that weredemonstrated, we always started by asking a specific question: ‘How would you describe your typical day?’ This question was followed by asking other questions that would lead to identifying competencies, challenges and methods adopted by them to develop themselves. The interview was recorded and each recording was transcribed.

These leaders, in their interviews, elaborated the activities that they performedduringa normal day. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify activities that they were engaging

in. The list so arrived was then compared with the competency frameworks of a few corporate entities as well as the frameworks mentioned in the literature. The analysis highlighted the differences between these two groups, that is the corporate leaders and the SMEs.

Details about samples

Identification of leaders: The leaders were SME owner managers from PMR (Pune Metropolitan Region) who are engaged in the daily operations of their manufacturing setup. These leaders were in business at least for 10 years and hailed from various manufacturing industries Table 1 gives details of demographic distribution of the sample.

		# of respondents
<i>Education</i>		
	Technical Graduation	10
	Finance Graduation	5
<i>Background</i>		
	First generation entrepreneur	9
	Inherited small business	6
<i>Nature of business</i>		
	Supplier to Original Equipment Manufacturer(OEM)	8
	Tools and Industrial products	7
<i>Employee Strength</i>		
	< 15	3
	15-50	3
	50-100	5
	>100	3
<i>Yearly Turnover</i>		
	Less than 2 Crores	3
	2-10 Crores INR	4
	10 – 50 Crores INR	4
	>50 Crores INR	3

Table 1: Demographic distribution

Content Analysis

Each transcription was coded independently by two researchers. The transcriptions were coded into actions, beliefs, emotions, challenges and background. Various sentences were tagged by the code that it represented. The code identified by both reserachers were compared and differences were rsolved; only those codes that were agreed by both were retained.

A. Arriving at “grounded” list of competencies

As we collected all the codes, we isolated codes related to ‘actions’. These statements indicated actions against beliefs, emotions or values. The focus was on action, because we wanted to arrive at behavioural indicators. We found 292 instances of such activities carried out across these interviews. We then clubbed similar actions based on narration. Then focusing on action codes, similar codes were grouped together. Thus 292 activities were grouped in 27 activity classes indicating competencies. Each group thus represents a ‘Competency’ and the set of actions aggregated in the group represent ‘Behaviour Indicators’ (BIs). Table .2. gives the list of these competencies.

Competency	Behaviour indicators
Operations Review	Checking status against targets, resolving issues, problem solving
Result Orientation	Setting targets and goals, initiating corrective action if the results are not according to expectations
Train workers for job requirement	Training the workers for performing day to day activities, training in quality, safety
Process Management	Creating/changing Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), training workers on SOP, defining roles and responsibilities
Decision Making	Taking decisions related to daily situations and for special situations
Functional	Solving technical issues, developing/designing new

Capability	products, conducting technical reviews
Managing People	Allocating work, providing instructions to workers
Managing Resources	Managing inventory, cash and people to reduce cost; identifying areas of wastage, changing procedures to minimize wastage
Crisis Management	Participate in firefighting crisis, monitoring crisis management
Planning Operations	scheduling and resource planning.
Managing Relationships	Meeting people, Meeting peers, interacting with stakeholders
Conflict Management	Managing politics at the customer end, handling conflicts with various stakeholders
Managing Customers	Communicating with customers, meeting customers for specific sell
Networking	Attending industry association meetings, visiting exhibitions and seminars, meeting customers for networking
Managing Communication	Responding to mail, writing proposals, giving presentations, handling communication for the team
Handling Cultural Differences	Handling customers of different cultural background, interacting with stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds
Developing People	Arranging functional training, arranging soft skills training, giving feedback to employees
Participative Management	Involving the team in planning, delegation and mentoring the people for growing roles
Developing Self	Attending trainings, reading, attending seminars and exhibitions, searching the internet to gather

	knowledge
Being a Team Player	Engaging in social circles outside business
Managing Stress	Engaging in a hobby / physical exercise / spiritual interaction
Business, Brand Development	Giving presentations in seminars, Product display in exhibitions, Meeting new customers, Brand development
Strategy Formulation	Identifying industry trends, developing long term strategy, sharing strategy with team
Innovation	Developing new products, introducing innovative changes in process, developing radically different products/methods
Managing Change	Identifying changes in the organization, policies, and strategies, discussing changes and their impact with the team, implementing change
Developing and Managing Value System	Explaining and enforcing value system within the team
Developing Vision	Articulating and stating the vision, sharing the vision with employees

Table 2: List of competencies derived from interviews

To understand the development approaches as well challenges the interview transcripts were revisited to understand the context of development. The behaviour indicators were compared internally between small and large SMEs, SMEs that developed their own products and SMEs that worked for specific OEMs. The list and the behaviour indicators were also compared with the frameworks from literature. A comparative study of these group with focus on how these factors influence competency development is presented here.

B. Understanding the Context in which competencies are practiced

The basic contingency theory suggests when a person's capability is consistent with the needs that the job demands as well as the organizational environment then the person may exhibit superlative performance. (Boyatzis R. E., 2008). So, while understanding the activities taken up by SMEs, the environment in which these activities occur cannot be ignored.

Overall environment

All the participants indicated that there are adequate opportunities for growth. The competition is global, with a lot of multinational companies making and selling their products in India. At the same time, SMEs are also aiming to go global. Availability of finance has improved; however, availability of other resources, such as land or qualified workers is still a challenge. Although friendlier policies are being implemented and e-governance is setting in, most of the participants do not feel the impact of the same. A leader who is running business for almost 3 decades states the difference such as availability of raw material, finance and local as well as global competition [interview 11]

Learning Environment

External Influence

Customers triggered many learning situations. The customers provide details of latest technological advances, insist and influence the process improvement, provide training and provide forums to interact and improve. According to some leaders customers not only arrange training, but support in taking up initiatives such as ISO [Interview 4]

Impact of learning clusters

Action learning approach is often stated as a useful approach for development of SME leaders. Thorpe et al, elaborate the importance of learning networks (Thorpe, Cope, Ram, & Pedler, 2009). We discovered two leaders who regularly participated in a cluster activity for a few hours every fortnight where a group of entrepreneurs met and learnt from consultants and from each other. They claimed that they *visit each other's company's and understand their way of working and tricks* They also claimed about support from mentor of the cluster [Interview 10,11]

Learning mode:

Internet has provided huge opportunity to know trends, learn job specific skills and share experiences. It is cheap and exhaustive. SME owners regularly use internet to their advantage. As a leader explains “Some information we try to find out from google, Whenever I get stuck with any process, I refer to Google. It tells me that by doing the process in this manner, I will not face any problems. If I need some material, then to check its availability and then enquiry I use Google again” [interview 10]

C. Critical comparison of competency list

The list becomes more interesting if we compare the list externally with corporates and internally between different types of SMEs. Presence of competency as well as absence of a competency in the list, both give us interesting insights

Differences between very small and large SMEs

Since we had interviewed leaders ranging from INR 10 million to 350 million, we also tried to identify differences in behaviours between the two. It appeared that larger organizations had

- A clearly defined vision to grow– The owners stated that they spend time to articulate that vision and communicate it. Their vision is more broad based and aggressive. For example, per one leader “We have decided that now all the new products that we will develop should be of worldwide acceptance” [Interview 5]

Conscious long term planning – Large SMEs had a broader plan that was developed and reviewed regularly. In contrast, leaders of very small firms often complained about the planning process being a waste of time. As a leader of very small company explained “To be frank, we go to the big companies where they tell us that we should make some long-term business plan, two years I made the business plan for the company but nothing happened according to the plan. But plan is not reviewed and never achieved.” [Interview 3]

- Support of external mentors – The owners of larger organization sought inputs about strategy from external mentors& discussed the strategy at regular intervals. Usually such mentors are external directors, or for very small companies it is the chartered accountant. [Interview 9]

- Investment in people development – Larger organizations made special efforts in creating an organizational structure so that people could grow.They also encouraged such development

by training as well as providing opportunities to grow. For examples one of the leader states “Unless and until you don’t give authority, you don’t know if they are going to get ready. ... so for that moment when they make mistakes, I am there to help them.... but then the same mistake should not be repeated.” (*Interview 7*)

- Owner’s investment in self in terms of reading, training, etc. – The owners of larger firms claimed that they proactively gathered knowledge. “There are some excellent websites. So, from these websites, I receive newsletters every day. I read every day. Similarly, there are some webinars. I attend those webinars to gather information. “. (*Interview 15*)

Differences between companies that are dependent on OEMs and those who have products that are not specific to an OEM

- Customers and Networks – The OEM based organizations are dependent on the customer. They spend a lot of time in customer interaction but less time in network building, whereas the companies that are not heavily dependent on customers, spend more time in networking.
- Innovation - OEM based companies focus on process innovation whereas product based companies work on developing new products.
- Learning - The OEMs invested in trainings and influenced many changes in OEM based companies. Learning in product companies was entirely based on the owner’s initiative.
- Strategy – The strategy of OEM based companies often revolved around the idea of keeping the relation with the existing customer strong (secure) whereas the strategy for other companies focused more on acquiring new customers.

Differences between competency list in SME and corporates

While the corporate frameworks were compared with the list certain competencies of corporate are missing in SME leader’ narratives

- Entrepreneurial leadership was not stated specifically in the interviews. All the respondents were entrepreneurs and this competency is considered as ‘given’ and not specifically stated as a requirement.

- Attitude - The corporate frameworks stated personality characteristics such as courage, charisma, confidence, stamina, compassion, etc. There is no specific mention of these characteristics.
- Result Orientation- SME leaders are as much result oriented as corporates. However, taking ownership of results is implicit in the role and not stated.
- Managing internal politics – ‘Being politically savvy’ is an important competency to survive through any highly competitive corporate organization. SME owners do not need to manage such politics internally. However, they did talk about managing politics with customers.
- Organizational Alignment & Holistic thinking – The chances that silos will be formed is far more in larger corporations where a function/department may be focusing on only one aspect of business. Operating beyond functional boundaries is a critical competency in such a case. In case of smaller organizations, the owner is emotionally as well as actively connected with all functions at the same time
- Work life balance– The Corporate world with its fierce competition may lead to extra pressures that lead to imbalance in work and personal life. An SME owner, however, being the owner of the organization can make ‘choices’ about apportioning the time between work and life.

Whereas certain SME leaders may require some competencies that are not required at senior most levels in corporate world

- Functional capability – Very senior corporate leaders often focus only on strategy. However, SME leaders must engage in technical/functional activities more often. They may have to be aware of more than one function.
- Operational competencies – There are some competencies that are part of day to day job roles for junior managers in corporate organizations, but in SMEs, these are often performed by the owners. For example, proposal making, pricing, scheduling, cost management etc.
- Networking – Certain roles in corporate settings may be performed with limited / no networking; however, after a stage, networking is essential in both corporates and SMEs.

And in some cases, the requirement of competency is different

- Resourcefulness – For corporate executives, resource management is often associated with managing relationships with people who control those resources, whereas in case of SMEs, it was associated with managing resources effectively.
- Training – In Corporates, someone may operate in the advisory/mentoring role, but not necessarily in training. However, an SME leader must train the workers and staff. Organized training is often not feasible.
- Strategy – Strategy formation/implementation was not uniformly observed in SMEs.

Competency development

Corporates have a structured approach towards competency development – However SMEs develop using different approach. The analysis of interviews shows us how we can take up development activities more effectively

- Role of customer - It was observed that customers provided critical inputs and were often responsible for the development of SMEs. This observation highlights the role of large organizations in the ecosystem. It also highlights the role various corporate executives could play in SMEs. For example, one leader gets to know trends and gets triggers for innovation from customers “, I frequently interact very closely with these four customers in whose head their next year’s ideas are getting developed – what technology they would need – they share such data and ideas” [interview 16]
- Complacency– At least 3 respondents claimed that they were not ‘ambitious’. They were clear about their expectations and were satisfied that they would achieve accordingly. It appears that SME owners form their own comfort zone beyond which they are hesitant to grow. This finding strikingly contrasts the insatiable ambition to grow exhibited by highly successful corporate leaders. As one leader who is running very successful organization says “Ambition and no ambition changes the entire outlook of the company. This is not the case with corporates. They have shareholder’s pressure and ... so they keep working.” (Interview 11)

Challenges in competency development

The finding also highlights the challenges the development initiatives will face. As there is no motivation to grow, the motivation to change is also limited and so also motivation to learn new ideas.

- Lack of feedback - One critical factor that influences a corporate leader is the process of feedback. Corporate leaders get feedback through channels such as appraisals. However, in case of SME leaders, such feedback is not sought consciously. As one leader puts “we don’t get a feedback. I am in a position where no one will point to me saying you need to improve this way” [Interview 15]

- Work levels-Corporate leaders grow through gradual steps as elaborated by work levels, whereas SME leaders often play roles at many work levels at the same time and thus would need varied competencies at the same time. “SME mainly trained manpower is not there hence owner has to be Jack of all trades” [interview 5]

This clearly indicates that if the SME leaders should be given inputs in form of consulting or training it should be related to operational and functional competencies and not futuristic competencies such as strategic planning or visioning.

- Mentoring infrastructure –In the corporate world, the leaders would at least be mentored by the boss. In case of SME owners, they do not report to any boss and as such there is no structural requirement of seeking advice from anyone. Past studies indicate challenges in providing effective mentoring to SME leaders. As Peel, has indicated - “Possibly one of the greatest barriers identified in the literature is the difficulty in persuading SMEs regarding the benefits of any form of workforce development, including coaching and mentoring. SMEs failed to find consistent links between training and development and a range of performance related variables such as survival, sales growth, and profitability” (Peel, 2008). One leader who actively seeks help from We also have open dialogues with consultants, CAs, personally what should be done, at what level we should take it to... [interview 15]

As was already indicated, the inputs and support provided by peer networks, action learning clusters etc. is far more effective in case SME leader development.

- Training -The SME leader also operates as trainer for his workers but at the same time may not know how to train. “In my organization, it has been a trend that I take training of workers. 90-95% of my employees are recruited as fresher, I train them. We do not hire trainer from outside. “[interview 5]

Rather than formal classroom training other methods such as getting knowledge through internet, getting to know latest trends by visiting exhibitions appears to be more effective.

Conclusion

This study has provided a grounded list of competencies that is relevant for SMEs. Anyone who is interested in development of SME leadership (the leaders, mentors, policy makers) can use this insight to develop relevant and useful interventions. The study highlights that certain competencies that are relevant/important are not relevant for SMEs and vice versa. It also suggests that development needs of smaller SMEs will be quite different the comparison clearly highlights the need to develop operational competencies for SME leaders. The study thus provides path of development for small SMEs It also highlights the need for creating mentoring infrastructure for SMEs and the influence of clusters and customers on leadership development of SMEs.

Way forward

This study can further be extended to other parts of the country; it can also be extended by undertaking a wide spread grounded research to develop deeper understanding of the competencies required by SME leaders.

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