4-1-1994

Personality and Career Development: A Study of Gender Differences

Judi Brownell
Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, jlb18@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles

Part of the Hospitality Administration and Management Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article or Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Hotel Administration Collection at The Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles and Chapters by an authorized administrator of The Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact hotellibrary@cornell.edu.

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact web-accessibility@cornell.edu for assistance.
Personality and Career Development: A Study of Gender Differences

Abstract
What are the “right” personality traits for career success in hospitality management?

Keywords
hospitality management, personality, workplace culture, women in hospitality, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

Disciplines
Hospitality Administration and Management

Comments
Required Publisher Statement
© Sage. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

This article or chapter is available at The Scholarly Commons: https://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles/995
Personality and Career Development
A Study of Gender Differences

What are the “right” personality traits for career success in hospitality management?

by Judi Brownell

She has all the right qualifications for your assistant-manager position. Her parents own a country inn in Vermont. She spent two summers on a cruise ship and established an impressive record while earning a four-year degree in hospitality management. Her recommendations are excellent. On paper she far outshines the three other final candidates.

The problem? She just doesn’t seem right for your four-star property. It could have been the way she hesitated before answering your questions or the fact that she didn’t laugh at the casual jokes you made. Or was it that she seldom made eye contact? Or that she sat in silence during lunch while everyone else at the table discussed the recent home-team loss to Chicago? You really don’t know. She just doesn’t seem to have the “right stuff” to be successful in your fast-paced, constantly changing workplace.

As the number of well-qualified candidates for your management positions increases, the bottom line on selection decisions is often a matter of gut reaction as well as logical assessment. Those with appropriate experience and impressive credentials are often held to having other right stuff as well, stuff that is much more difficult to measure. In many instances, however, it comes down to a matter of personality character-

Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is an associate professor of management communication at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.
tions with guests are perceived extensive, since managers' interactions at all levels.4 Industry practitioners and researchers alike have suggested that the hospitality industry is unique and therefore requires a particular set of personal competencies. Normann, for instance, refers to the industry as "personality intensive," since managers' interactions with guests are perceived as part of the service itself, and their personal influence on employees affects customer interactions at all levels.4

Second, a wealth of literature on personality characteristics and their relation to managerial effectiveness suggests that the personality characteristics that contribute to the perception of high performance may be gender-linked.5 Although fewer studies have examined women in hospitality-management careers, the issue is of particular importance in an industry characterized by a diverse workforce and the recognition that the glass ceiling has yet to be completely broken.6 In fact, women's career development has been an issue of much interest in the hospitality literature.7 In an effort to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on women and management, a study was undertaken to determine the characteristics that general managers believed were most

Hospitality managers rate higher than other types of managers on calmness, assertiveness, enthusiasm, realism, and detail-orientation. It may be enlightening to identify what general managers believe the right stuff is and to determine whether the perceptions of men and women differ.

Before presenting the responses of general managers regarding the personality characteristics they perceived as related to career advancement, I will review previous work in the area, with a summary of research on hospitality managers’ personality characteristics and an examination of theories of gender-linked differences in management style.

**Personality Traits of Hospitality Managers**

For several decades researchers have examined the personality traits of both middle and general managers to determine what makes an effective hospitality manager.

Swanljung, for instance, interviewed corporate executives to determine whether any common personality characteristics existed in this group. His findings suggested that hard work, fairness, the ability to motivate others, and determination were keys to success.

Stone’s research attempted to distinguish hospitality managers from other managers. He concluded that hospitality managers rated higher on calmness, assertiveness or competitiveness, enthusiasm, realism, deliberateness, and detail-orientation.

Worsfold’s 1989 study of hotel general managers in a major U.K. hotel group determined that the sample was more assertive, venturesome, and imaginative than managers generally. He also proposed that hospitality managers place a high value on interpersonal and group skills, owing to their unique job requirements. When asked what they believed to be the characteristics required of a successful hotel manager, Worsfold’s respondents most frequently mentioned people skills, resilience, self-motivation, and intelligence. Obviously, results to date have been inconclusive and the need for additional research is apparent.

The interest in linking personality traits with managerial effectiveness has naturally given rise to interest in measures to determine the personality traits of prospective employees, particularly for management-level positions. Personality assessment is a topic of increasing concern to human-resource professionals interested in measures that will provide the most comprehensive and accurate indicators of future success. Two primary types of testing have been explored as selection tools: paper-and-pencil measures and structured interviews.

**Paper-and-pencil tests.** The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator measures individual preferences, or styles, along four dimensions: extroversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judgment/perception.

Pavesic and Brymer, using the MBTI, found that hospitality managers’ most common profile was ESTJ (extroversion, sensing, thinking, judgment). In fact, the most significant difference between hospitality professionals and other samples was their stronger preference for judging. However, of the four indicators, the interest in linking personality traits with managerial effectiveness has naturally given rise to interest in measures to determine the personality traits of prospective employees, particularly for management-level positions. Personality assessment is a topic of increasing concern to human-resource professionals interested in measures that will provide the most comprehensive and accurate indicators of future success. Two primary types of testing have been explored as selection tools: paper-and-pencil measures and structured interviews.

**Paper-and-pencil tests.** The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator measures individual preferences, or styles, along four dimensions: extroversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judgment/perception.

Pavesic and Brymer, using the MBTI, found that hospitality managers’ most common profile was ESTJ (extroversion, sensing, thinking, judgment). In fact, the most significant difference between hospitality professionals and other samples was their stronger preference for judging. However, of the four indicators, the interest in linking personality traits with managerial effectiveness has naturally given rise to interest in measures to determine the personality traits of prospective employees, particularly for management-level positions. Personality assessment is a topic of increasing concern to human-resource professionals interested in measures that will provide the most comprehensive and accurate indicators of future success. Two primary types of testing have been explored as selection tools: paper-and-pencil measures and structured interviews.
the judgment/perception dimension probably has the least impact on performance.

One of a growing number of companies that develop and market personality-assessment instruments is Performax, which produces tests that cover traditional topics such as communication and management style, as well as lifestyle, values, and other dimensions. From those indicators, interviewers make judgments about the fit between the individual and the organization. Similarly, Wonderlic tests measure personality traits such as cool/warm, easily upset/calm, relaxed/tense, and conservative/experimenting. Many other sources are available to those interested in assessing personality characteristics.

**Structured interviews**. By interviewing top performers in the hospitality industry, SRI Gallup has identified ten hotel-management themes, each of which distinguishes hospitality managers from other groups: focus; performance orientation; wanting to be liked; responsibility; excellence; and the ability to stimulate, activate, arrange, develop, and/or delegate. Themes are defined as "spontaneous, recurring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior" that operate consistently. Rather than rely on traditional criteria, such as job experience and academic performance, SRI looked for personality traits that describe people who do an outstanding job.

SRI Gallup has developed structured-interview techniques to determine the extent to which a person has each of the above characteristics. The company has several video-assisted preemployment tests and can train staff members to conduct selection interviews that will reveal the targeted personality traits.

The goal of yet another company, Talent+, is to identify a person's "talents" and match them to a particular job. Like SRI, Talent+ depends on a structured interview with carefully designed questions. A study of hotel-staff associates by Talent+ illustrates statistically significant differences between high and low performers with regard to work ethic, persuasiveness, empathy, exactness, and human-relations skills.10

**Gender and Managerial Behavior**

A second recurring question on the subject of personality characteristics is whether gender is an important variable in management style. A range of studies have addressed the issue, with inconsistent results.

In 1980 researchers for the American Management Association surveyed 2,000 male and female managers and found no significant gender-related differences in managerial style. One possible explanation for the similarity is that there are no gender-linked personality traits. Another possible explanation is that women in upper-level management positions have personality traits generally associated with senior managers, who traditionally have been men. In fact, many investigators have concluded that women in senior management positions have adapted their behavior to emulate traditional male styles.

Not everyone agrees. Rosener argues that the increase in the number of top female executives has facilitated a feminine management style characterized by a

---

10 Information about the study of hotel-staff associates is from an undated, unsigned public relations brochure issued by Talent+.
stronger relationship orientation, more information sharing, and more concern for employees' feelings of self-worth. Bass concurs, reporting that female senior managers rated higher than their male counterparts in transformational leadership, a style characterized by greater employee empowerment and shared decision making.11 A study reported in the Wall Street Journal also suggests that female managers are more sympathetic to employees' personal concerns.12 Evidence to date on the question of whether there are gender-linked leadership traits is far from conclusive. Even those who have proposed that an androgynous style may be the key to high performance have been accused of suggesting that both genders should sacrifice their unique strengths to the service of popular management theory.

The interest in the relation between personality traits and managerial effectiveness remains high; yet the issue is fraught with problems. Even if there is a configuration of traits strongly associated with managerial effectiveness, such traits are difficult to measure. The realization that most performance problems result from poor person-job fit, not a lack of training, has given rise to increased emphasis on managing the selection process and assessing personality traits. In addition, organizations looking to the future seek methods to identify managers who are most likely to move smoothly into senior positions.

The following study contributes to that effort by identifying the personality characteristics that hospitality general managers believe have been most critical to their career development.13

A Study of Hospitality Managers

Although many studies have examined personality characteristics and leadership, few have focused on hospitality managers and very few have addressed the question of personality traits as they influence career development in our industry.

In the study reported here, both male and female general managers were asked to identify the personality characteristics they believed contributed most significantly to their career

---


13 Of course, there may be differences between the traits that actually led to advancement and the traits that a respondent perceives to have led to advancement, but the general managers' perceptions can, I think, be taken at face value. Their perceptions likely relate to their attitudes and become their reality.
advancement. Since a substantial body of literature suggests that strong stereotypes are associated with gender and leadership characteristics, respondents were requested to answer an open-ended question about the personality traits that they believed contributed to their professional advancement, rather than choose among a set of traits.

Survey design and procedures. An extensive literature review of managers' career development was undertaken to determine the variables associated with mobility in organizations generally and advancement in the hospitality industry in particular.14 Interviews were also conducted with eight general managers to determine general perceptions of factors influencing career development. A survey was then developed to identify the personality traits male and female general managers believed contributed most to their career advancement.15

Subjects. A sample of female general managers was derived from the 20 largest U.S. hospitality companies, by number of rooms, in the American Hotel and Motel Association directory. Only the general managers of full-service hotels were surveyed, and only U.S. companies were selected to help rule out variations in career development due to cultural differences.

A corporate representative from each company was invited to participate by providing the names and addresses of all current female general managers. Nineteen companies responded; women from 16 of them were represented in the final sample. Surveys were sent to 107 female general managers; 69 of them, or 64 percent, responded. A stratified random sample of 203 male general managers from the other properties owned by those sixteen companies was surveyed; the final response was 144, or 71 percent.

Demographic differences. The first section of the survey requested demographic information. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, marital status, educational background, years of experience in the hospitality industry, and other pertinent information.

Female general managers, as a whole, are younger than their male counterparts. Consequently there is a notable difference in

---


15 For the purposes of this study, I assumed that the personality traits that make for effective managers—the SRI themes—aren't that different from the traits that helped them advance in their careers. On the other hand, it is important to note that the traits that are practically a given among successful managers may not be the traits that an individual would mention as contributing to his or her career advancement, even though they may be among that person's strongest assets. For example, if you have a pool of determined, ambitious, goal-oriented, hardworking managers from which to select a new general manager, which personality trait (or traits) actually distinguishes one of those individuals from the others so that she or he gets to be the general manger? Maybe that person would say that being flexible and a compassionate listener (in addition to the shared traits) was what set him or her apart and contributed to that career advancement.
EXHIBIT 1
Career-advancement characteristics

From a pool of 213 people (69 women and 144 men), the following figures show
the percentage of men and women who believe a given trait has contributed to
their career advancement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>% of total (N = 213)</th>
<th>%women (N = 69)</th>
<th>%men (N = 144)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hardwork</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness, honesty, integrity</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry knowledgeability</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening skills</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment, loyalty</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal orientation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitiousness, aggressiveness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial ability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational skills</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the number of years men and
women have spent in the indus-
try. The percentage of women
who have worked in hospitality
organizations fewer than ten
years is four times larger than
the percentage of men, while the
percentage of men who have
worked in the industry more than
twenty years is over six times
larger than the percentage of
women.

Significant differences also
appeared in the numbers of men
and women who were married.
Nearly 35 percent of the women
in this study indicated they were
single, compared with only 6
percent of the men.

Personality traits. Respond-
dents were asked to name up to
three unranked personality
characteristics that they believed
had the most influence in helping
them advance in the field and
achieve their current position.
Two trained assistants and 1
sorted characteristics into content
categories; we had a 97-percent
rate of agreement.

Ninety-two percent of the
characteristics fell into one of 28
categories. Seven of the catego-
ries were identified by less than 5
percent of one of the samples:
problem-solving ability, decision-
making ability, service orienta-
tion, willingness to take risks,
consistency, common sense, and
creativity. Another five categories
were mentioned by less than 10
percent of one of the samples:
leadership ability, long-range
vision, team playing, intelligence,
and patience.

Exhibit 1 presents a summary
of the characteristics that were
important to women or men,
showing the combined percentage
of all respondents who identified
any given trait, as well as the
separate percentages of identifi-
cation within each group.

Women were in slightly
greater agreement than men
about the characteristics they
believed contributed to their
career development. Most often
mentioned by women were
interpersonal skills (44 percent),
determination (44 percent), hard
work (30 percent), enthusiasm
(26 percent), positive attitude
(19 percent), and ambitiousness
(14 percent). Asked the same
question, men responded most
often with integrity (32 percent),
hard work (27 percent), inter-
personal skills (26 percent),
commitment (22 percent),
determination (21 percent), and
industry knowledgeability
(18 percent).

Some characteristics were
mentioned with much greater
frequency by one of the two
samples. Women mentioned
enthusiasm, determination,
interpersonal skills, sense of
humor, and ambitiousness more
frequently than did men. Men
identified integrity, commitment,
and financial ability more often
than did women.

Some traits were mentioned in
nearly equal proportions by both
groups. Men and women shared
an appreciation for the signifi-
cance of listening skills, hard
work, goal-orientation, flexibility,
and compassion.

Study Summary
In this study female general
managers’ self-reports of the
personality traits that contrib-
uted to their career advancement
present a profile characterized by
determination, excellent commu-
nication skills, and hard work.
The women also relied on their
enthusiasm and positive attitude
in making their way through the
organization.

Although the men also relied
on effective communication,
determination, and hard work,
two additional characteristics
that consistently emerged were
integrity and loyalty. That
finding is consistent with earlier
research aimed at distinguishing
hospitality managers from other
groups. Shamir suggests, for
instance, that hospitality managers' most important values are honesty and responsibility.\textsuperscript{16}

Of the 16 key characteristics identified by the two samples, those that are male characteristics, in terms of what researchers have considered male and female stereotypes, include ambitiousness, goal orientation, and strong financial ability.\textsuperscript{17} Current literature regarding female stereotypes includes compassion, enthusiasm, and flexibility. However, in the current study the self-reports of both male and female samples conform only marginally to stereotypical notions of gender-linked characteristics.\textsuperscript{18}

With regard to traits that are stereotypically male, 14 percent of the women and only 4 percent of the men described their behavior as ambitious. About the same percentage of men and women (11 and 9 percent) reported that their goal orientation contributed to their career advancement. While no women identified


\textsuperscript{18} The meanings that individuals assign to words can vary, by gender or by other factors. “Enthusiastic” may be a gender-linked term, and men may tend not to use it to describe themselves, regardless of how “enthusiastic” they may actually be. Women, on the other hand, may feel comfortable applying “enthusiastic” to themselves and use it to describe the same trait for which men use another word. The question of what language means to different people is outside the scope of this study, where I had to assume that respondents were clear about the general meaning of the terms they chose to describe themselves.

financial ability as a key characteristic, almost 12 percent of the men reported it as one of the three most important traits.

Shifting to the characteristics often associated with women, we find that both compassion and flexibility were reported equally by the two groups, while enthusiasm characterized the women (26 percent) much more than the men (2 percent).

It appears, then, that women who have moved into upper-level management positions are more likely than men to identify their ambitiousness, positive attitude, and enthusiasm as assets.

Conclusions

The ideal work environment may be one in which gender is no longer an issue. If the stereotypes can be broken down, we will equally value women and men who are focused, goal-oriented, caring, and compassionate. Such individuals have increased opportunities not only to be rewarded for their contributions but also to shape their organization’s future. Excellence is most likely when hardworking, determined people with strong interpersonal skills work together to achieve high standards of quality and performance.

The high number of all respondents who believe that honesty and integrity contributed significantly to their career advancement speaks to one of the most important lessons of all, that success may be a matter of character, not gender. Tomorrow’s industry leaders, men and women alike, must bring a keen sense of ethical responsibility and high standards of integrity to an industry that will clearly require many tough decisions in the decades ahead. CQ