

Middle management in academia: Social skills and academic professional awareness wanted

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Abstract

What kind of leader does an academic really want? Is it a colleague-based leader from the same profession, with comparable scientific skills, or a leader with typical management skills? If a university seeks middle managers of the first mentioned type, how does that comply with management literature, and the employee's preferences? In this study from a Norwegian modern university, employees were asked to rank their preferences for skills of their immediate leader. These results were compared to management literature and to the university's middle management recruitment policy. The results demonstrate that while the university's recruitment policy emphasized formal competency, experience with research, and ability to implement new technologies, the employees preferred leaders with social skills and academic professional awareness, who are solutions-oriented, open-minded, and able to motivate and build good teams. In leadership theories, key elements are social competence, which is more in line with the university employees' preferences.

Keywords: academic professional awareness; middle management; academia; leadership theories; recruitment strategies; employees' preferences; social skills

Introduction

Management

Research on management is a very comprehensive and important field. Surveys among employees in any given organization show that 65–75% of employees have issues with their immediate leaders (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Hogan & Kaiser (2005) built on the perspective of management and claims that leadership is to achieve goals through other people (Yukl, 2013). Within this perspective, research shows that different leadership styles and leadership behaviors can influence the effectiveness of leadership by influencing employees' effort, productivity, and well-being (Martinsen, 2019).

The immediate leader in academia, is often the middle manager at the lowest level i.e. Head of studies. They are closest to human capital and the production of R&D. Middle managers ranges from the positions of head of studies up to the level of deans (Holen, 2014; Meek et al., 2010). Middle management in academia has changed over the last two decades. It used to be a

position that researchers were appointed to; everyone did their turn. A senior rank employee was appointed based on their deep subject knowledge, experience, and scientific accomplishments (e.g., number of publications in international journals), not based on leadership skills. It was a position with low status, but it also gave the leader a new position with a new power. This power was associated with recruitment, management, research applications, and personal responsibility. These responsibilities were later assigned to middle managers, who no longer had to be previous members of the academic staff. In Norway, the reform of higher education (Ministry_of_Education_and_Research, 2001) from 2001 led to a strengthening of the management at the level of head of studies due to an increased emphasis on knowledge and professional management. This shift was motivated by the need for an increase of quality in higher education (Holen, 2014).

This created some new challenges because leaders from outside the organization had to prove themselves worthy in a new way. The academia faces complex and dynamic social, economic, and political contexts that must be taken into consideration (Braun et al., 2016). This shift in leadership role for the middle manager in academia is widely discussed in the literature (Deem et al., 2007; Kallenberg, 2015; Meek et al., 2010; Santiago et al., 2006; Sue & McAuley, 2005; Verhoeven, 2010).

Current leadership theories

Leadership theory is a large field. Hence, to study leadership in academia, it is relevant to take into account that universities are organizations built on long traditions. At the same time these traditions are challenged due to the shift in leadership management from the “best-of-academic-peer-leadership” to a more professional middle management. In this change, academics will meet their leaders with different expectations.

To study these expectations, we have chosen current leadership theories that have been developed over time, with focus on different aspects of leading organizations; motivation, innovation, leading to enhance change and towards self-efficiency (Ng, 2008), (Halliwell et al., 2022). These theories are transactional leadership, transformational leadership, personal traits-theory and self-efficacy leadership, all commonly discussed in current leadership theory (Alrowwad et al., 2020; Bayraktar & Jiménez, 2020; Hansen & Pihl-Thingvad, 2019; Northouse & Northouse, 2022; Vasilescu, 2019; Yukl et al., 2020).

To understand the different dimensions, Martinsen et al. (2019) describe a three-stage ladder in the historical context of leaderships. They build their theoretical approach on an understanding that change in leadership is constantly bound to the need for organizations to adapt to changing conditions. Universities build on old traditions of university leadership, while it tries to adapt to changing society's demands for keeping education and research relevant in response to changes in societies' needs (Siekkinen et al., 2020). An historical overview seems relevant for an analysis of the current needs and demands for leadership in any organization.

The first stage of the ladder, transactional leadership, describes the leader as a “strong man,” with loyal employees who are dependent on the protection of their leader for necessities such as income, food, or physical protection. The promise of increased payment or other external motivation factors is the main tool used by the leader to increase the employees' output. Such

leadership shows less efficiency with the need for organizations to adapt to rapidly changing technology regimes, internationalization, and highly educated employees with expectations to develop their own academic and personal careers. Under such circumstances, transformative leadership has a greater impact on the potential for organizations to fulfil their goals (Martinsen, 2019).

The second stage in the ladder, transformational leadership, has a broad variety, but the common basis is an acceptance of effective leadership as closely linked to how the leader inspires and implements values to such an extent that the employees see their everyday duties and obligations as a part of the bigger picture (Bass & Reggio, 2005). Hence, through transformational leadership, employees will seek to perform on a larger scale only to ensure they have reached their personal goals. The “transformed” will fuel the employees’ motivation and cause them to stretch as much as they can to fulfil the visions of the institutions (Judge & Bono, 2000) and motivate them to contribute to profound changes in the instruction (Martinsen, 2019).

Accordingly, as transformational leadership requires leaders who can arouse motivation in the employees, there seems to be a close relationship between the personalities of the leader and the extent to which the employees are interested in following their leaders. A broad variety of research emphasizes the connection between the personal traits of the leader and how he or she seeks to solve challenges and operate as a leader. Particularly, extroversion, agreeableness, and openness are emphasized as traits that operate transformational leadership in several studies (Judge & Bono, 2000; Martinsen, 2019; Martinsen & Glaso, 2014).

For the further development of efficient leadership in academia, it is relevant to identify transformational leadership competences in middle managers. As Oslo Metropolitan University, and in academia in general, is “dynamic by its nature” (Siekkinen et al., 2020), change is a fundamental continuous process from at least two sides. On one side, in the academic profession, research brings new understanding and requires discipline change. By contrast, on the other side, top leadership in academia has a responsibility to ensure funding-based incentives, to contribute to the efficient use of public means, and to develop a sector of high quality (Siekkinen et al., 2020). This fits the model of new public management. Hence, the middle manager must handle the expectations and strategies of the top managers while maintaining the motivation and ensuring secure environments for the academic staff to perform at their best for their own goals.

However, transformational leadership seems to face some challenges in organizations with highly educated staff, as underpinned by Martinsen (2019). Martinsen points at a current change in institutions from transformational leadership to an increasing demand for self-efficacy-leadership. This is due to the increase in highly educated staff, as observed in universities. Such a workforce, highly motivated by their own performance and experience, expects and will need a high degree of autonomy to perform at their best. The demand for leadership is more of an administrative support for sufficient time and infrastructure to solve every day’s tasks and implement new ideas (Martinsen, 2019).

[The middle managers role in between expectations](#)

Much research has been done on middle management over the past years. A general conclusion is that the middle manager plays an important role in an organization (Hope, 2015; Kuvaas et al., 2014). Research emphasizes that reaching an organizational strategy is difficult

without the support of middle management (Hope, 2015). The middle management level in an organization is where the plans of the top management are implemented, and middle managers are often the people who lead the real change expected by the top management (Kuvaas et al., 2014; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). The middle management finds itself in the gap between expectations from top management and the demands and expectations of the employees. The top management should be responsible for defining an organization's strategy, but it requires strong middle management to realize it.

Middle Management in academia

Leadership development in higher education is still an under-investigated field of research and application (Bryman, 2007; Castle, 2001). However, Braun et al. suggest that the positive effects of leadership development in commercial organizations should also apply to the academic context (Braun et al., 2016).

Managing academics is challenging in the sense that academics are independent and need their academic freedom to be able to do their work. The setting is not like any other leadership settings, where the employees do what they are told or follow instructions. In academia, the employees have both their freedom to do research in their specific area, but they also have some obligations regarding teaching and student advising, and administrative tasks.

The last two decades have resulted in a growth in the number of middle managers because of the corporatization of universities. Despite this increasing demand for managers, research over the same period has demonstrated that changes in management infrastructure do not just happen, but must be led (Chilvers et al., 2018).

The literature on university management suggests that few academic administrators have any, or limited management training prior to beginning their positions (Carroll et al., 2008; Hecht, 2004; Smith & Wolverton, 2010; Thornton et al., 2018). The lack of a systematic approach to training, developing, and coaching academic managers leaves delivery of these critical results somewhat to chance.

Middle management in higher education is very challenging because of the generally difficult status of middle management and the difficulties in managing academics. Kuvaas et al. (2014) stated that middle managers are mediators and negotiators between organizations' institutional and technical or operational levels (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997) and play a vital role in implementing organizational policies and practices. Given their proximity to the operational level, middle managers bring policies and practices to life and are critical in carrying out organizational strategies (Branson et al., 2016; DeChurch et al., 2010; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

Oslo Metropolitan University - An internal debate

Oslo Metropolitan University is a university with a diverse academic profile, and a strategy of being forward-thinking and aiming to adopt new technologies and innovative solutions for the society. A requirement of a formal background at the PhD level as a minimum for applicants to middle management positions from the lowest level - the head of studies - raised an internal debate. Will this approach allow the university to meet its strategy goals if the formal requirements are more important than personality traits, abilities, and competences?

In this paper, we compared the employee's perceptions of the leadership skills of middle management at the lowest level, head of studies, at Oslo Metropolitan University with the university's strategies, mirrored in the recruitment templates. This current recruitment strategy surely does not fit with the wider body of literature on middle management in academia which emphasizes the shift from looking at the middle management as an "organizational responsibility role" which the academic professionals took in turn, to a more prominent new managerialism leadership role, where the middle manager is more of a leader than an academic (Deem et al., 2007; Kallenberg, 2015; Meek et al., 2010; Santiago et al., 2006; Sue & McAuley, 2005; Verhoeven, 2010). The discussion of whether a manager should have background from the profession, or a formal management background does not only apply to the university setting. In hospitals, having doctors in health management is widely discussed (Clay-Williams et al., 2017; Loh, 2015).

Universities' adaptability to respond to rapid society change requires middle managers able to adjust their leadership to these requirements. Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) is a university with a diverse academic profile, and a strategy of being forward-thinking and aiming to adopt new technologies and innovative solutions for the society. In this paper, we compared the employee's perceptions of the leadership skills of middle management at University with the university's strategies. The gap between the employees' and top management's perceptions of required middle management leadership skills is a central point of discussion, especially since the top management designs the announcement text for middle management positions.

The aim of this study was to investigate the similarities and discrepancies between leadership theories and middle management recruitment strategy at Oslo Metropolitan University and the academic employees' preferences regarding middle management leadership skills, and accordingly to analyze this through the lenses of current/prevaling leadership theories. To our knowledge no research has been done on the link between middle management recruitment strategies and middle management leadership theory, which is a topic relevant and transferable for other universities.

Methods

In this study we wanted to investigate the employees' preferences regarding middle management leadership skills in a quantitative manner. A quantitative approach was chosen because we wanted to be able to say something about the university's employees' preferences in general. The data for this study were therefore collected through a quantitative survey using a questionnaire where respondents were asked to rank a set of leadership skills according to their own preferences. The skills listed in the questionnaire were based on recruitment templates and leadership theories.

Middle management recruitment template as a starting point

To capture a picture of the strategy of leadership competence and abilities at Oslo Metropolitan University, we collected six different recruitment template announcements currently at use to recruit middle management leaders, three from the Faculty of Education and International Studies and three from the Faculty of Health Sciences. Even though these announcements were not the same, they had similarities. These templates and all other

recruitment templates used at Oslo Metropolitan University asked for two requirements: competence and personal abilities.

Formal education, a high level of professional skills, leadership experience, digital/technological competence and language requirements (Norwegian and English) are required competences, according to these templates. The announcements also had in common a demand for applicants with social competence, ability to create efficient and good teams, leadership style featuring openness, inclusive, and clearly, goal oriented, provident and visionary. Applicants were also required to have a leadership strategy that enhances motivation and be solution oriented in making decisions.

These similarities in the announcement were revealed when we copied all requirements in the six announcements in one document and sorted all requirements under headings and formulations covering the similar requirements. In this way, we made an extract of the six announcements with competence and abilities asked for. These requirements can be seen in Figure 1. The aim of this was to capture a recruitment strategy developed by leaders at the level above the middle management at the university, mirrored through these preferred competences and abilities.

Transformational leadership components in the questionnaire

To understand the relation between leadership suitability and the ability to lead academic staff towards common goals, we used the five-factor model of personal traits and the transformational leadership theory. (Judge & Bono, 2000; Martinsen, 2019; Martinsen & Glaso, 2014). We chose to elaborate on these two theoretical approaches given the recent research indicating a strong connection between a leaders' personal traits and his or her potential for transformational leadership. These models were used because there is a close link between the personal traits in the five factor model and transformational leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004). By uncover relevant traits from theories it is possible to investigate the link between the academic's desires for leadership skills and the traits in the models.

To compare these strategies with relevant theories of leadership competences and abilities, we added leadership features emphasized and acknowledged from two different perspectives of transformational leadership in the questionnaire: the four "I"s, dimensions of transformational leadership from Bass theory (Bass & Reggio, 2005) and elements from the five factor model of personality traits in line with transactional leadership (Digman, 1990).

Bass and Riggio (2005) emphasize four Is to describe what they call the components of transformational leadership:

Idealised Leadership (II): The leader is a role model who is trusted; a person to be counted on to do the right thing, and a person who is consistent in his or her decisions. This is a person with high morals and respect, and a leader who emphasizes the importance of a collective sense of mission.

Inspirational Motivation (IM): This is a leader who can build good teams. They are motivating and inspiring, and a charismatic person: Follower "seek to identify by the leader", visionaries, and compelling visions.

Intellectual Stimulation (IS): This is leadership that stimulates innovation through creativity, openness, inclusiveness. Such leaders seek to encourage and include their employees to seek good solutions and will not criticize any suggestions in public.

Individual Consideration (IC): Employees are mentored, coached, and receive individual tailor-made obligations and expectations. This leader can delegate tasks customized to each employees' competency. In addition, the leader is caring for employees, and they perform management by walking around.

To examine the extent to which Bass and Riggio's four "I"s were relevant features for the employees, we added the following elements to the questionnaire. Hence, we built a questionnaire from the template and added the following competences:

- Visionary and forward-looking leadership
- Motivating leadership
- Open and including leadership
- Ability to be a role model for the profession
- Understanding the development of the profession and future needs
- Ability to promote creativity and innovative behavior
- Ability to delegate tasks customized to each employees' competency
- Ability to care for employees

This can also be seen in Figure 1.

Components of personal traits in the questionnaire

The ability to motivate and promote transformational leadership emphasizes a close connection with personality traits (Digman, 1990; Judge et al., 2002). A variety of psychology research on character and personality from the 1930s until today emphasizes strong personality stability throughout any human's life. Digman Five Factor models consist of the following traits: extraversion/introversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (Digman, 1990).

Research has a consensus of the personality traits relevant for efficient leadership: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness. High score on the dimension neuroticism, tendency to be anxious, fearful, depressed, and moody is seen as a potential hurdle for efficient leadership (Judge & Bono, 2000; Judge et al., 2002; Martinsen, 2019). Such traits were not included in the questionnaire. However, to draw on Digman's theories and analyze relevant personal traits of the middle management at Oslo Metropolitan University, we included the following features in the questionnaire:

Extroversion and agreeableness

- Ability to build networks and good teams
- Ability to show confidence in employees

Adaptability

- Ability to be adaptable

Conscientiousness

- Ability to work systematically and conscientiously
- Ability to have a good overview and control

Openness

- Ability to promote creativity and innovative behavior
- Open and including leadership

This can also be seen in Figure 1.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into six categories of leadership skills: formal competence, qualifications, leadership experience, experience with digital tools, language skills, and complementary skills. Each of these categories consisted of four statements, which the employees were asked to rate according to what they consider as the most important middle-management skill within the category.

Before the questionnaire was sent to all respondents, it was piloted among a smaller group of employees. The respondents had some remarks, especially about the options for answering, and for differentiation of answers. Hence, we altered the questionnaire, and the respondents had to rank within the same category.

The questionnaire consisted of competences in the recruitment template as well as competences from the above-mentioned theories. Some of the qualifications in the questionnaire are present in both the theories and the recruitment templates. In the ranking process, the respondents were asked to keep in mind the strategic goals of Oslo Metropolitan University, which were initially presented in the questionnaire.

To combine the elements from the recruitment template with elements of competence and abilities from leadership theories in the questionnaire, it was possible to understand which qualifications academic staff prefer from a broader perspective to meet the strategic goals. The competences and personal traits are shown in Figure 1.

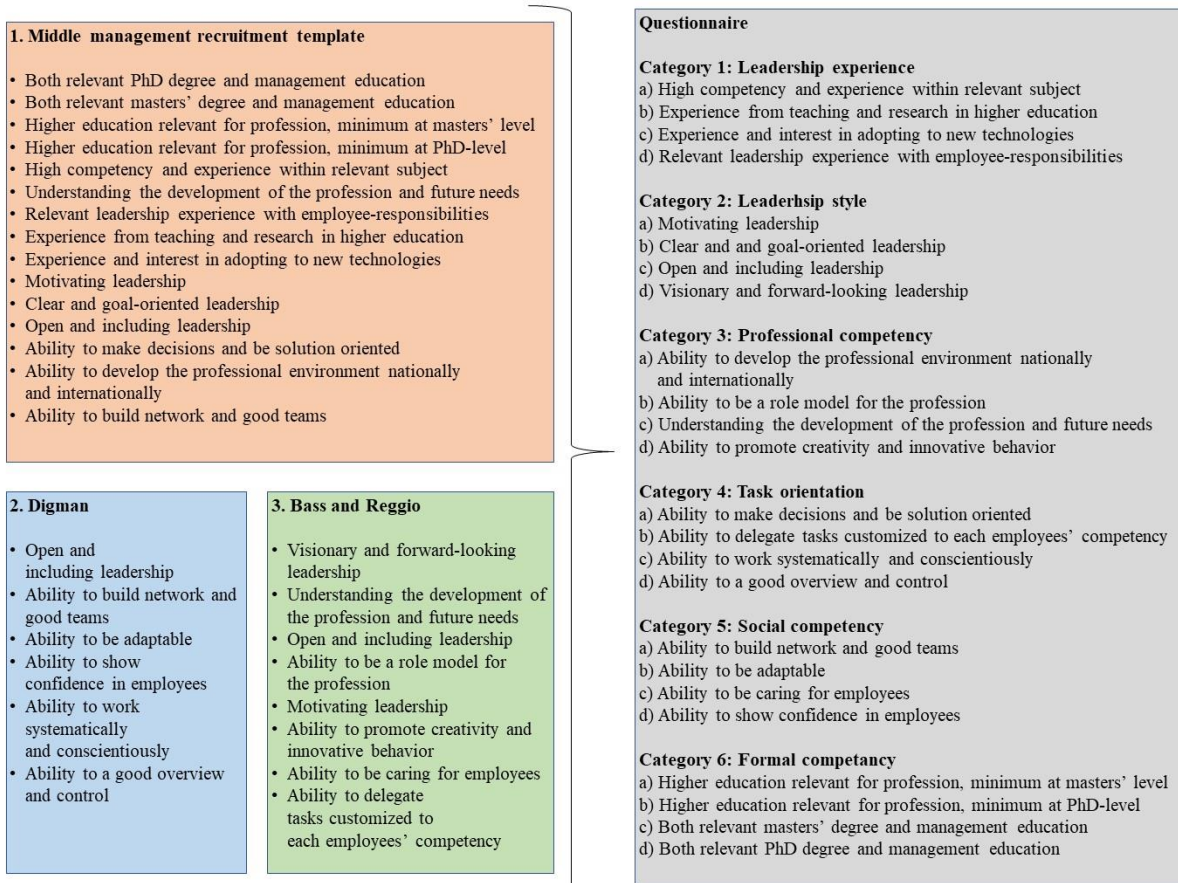


Figure 1 This figure shows how the elements from Oslo Metropolitan University recruitment template, the Digman theory (Digman, 1990) and the Bass and Reggio theory (Bass & Reggio, 2005) are combined to form the elements in the questionnaire.

Statistical analyses

The questionnaire consisted of six categories of leadership skills. Within each category, four skills were listed. The respondents were asked to rank these four skills within each category by assigning them a number from 1 to 4. An average score was then calculated for each skill. After testing for normality, ANOVA were performed for each of the six categories to investigate whether the average ranging of the four skills within each category was a statistically significant. For the categories with statistically significant differences in the range of the skills, independent t-tests were done for pairs of skills to find out exactly which skill was significantly differently ranked from the others.

The significance level was set to 0.05. However, with one ANOVA-analysis and potentially six t-tests within each of the six categories, a Bonferroni correction was used, where the significance level was reduced by α/k , k being the number of tests done. Significance levels for each test was therefore $0.05 / (7 \times 6) = 0.0012$.

Results

Demographics

The questionnaire was sent to approximately 600 scientific employees at the Faculty of Education and International Studies and Faculty of Health Sciences, Oslo Metropolitan University. A total of 171 employees responded to the questionnaire, which gives a response rate of approximately 28%. Two of them did not complete the survey, and four were not eligible due to their occupation as administrative staff. A total of 165 responses were therefore included in the analysis. Of these, 44 were lecturers (assistant professors), 82 were senior lecturers (associate professors), 26 were professors, and 14 were PhD students. A total of 53% of the respondents had been working for the university between 0 and 10 years, 32% had been working for the university between 11 and 20 years, and 15% had been working for the university for more than 21 years.

In Table 1, each skill for each category in the questionnaire is listed and marked with whether it evolves from the template (T) or from one of the two leadership theories: Digman (D) or Bass and Reggio (BR). In the third column of the table the ranking of the skills within each category are marked with 1 to 4 (1 meaning it is ranked as most important), and with the average rank-score in parentheses. The average rank score is an average of all the respondents ranking of this specific skill within this specific category. In the fourth column, the p-values for the ranking are listed with significant p-values marked with a star*.

Employees' preferred management skills

The results of the ranking of each skill within each category are listed in Table 1.

Category/skill	Template (T) Digman (D) Bass and Reggio (BR)	Average rank of skill within category (average rank-score)	P-values
Leadership experience:			$P_{(ANOVA)} = 2.2E-31^*$ $P_{(a. vs. b.)} = 1.8E-1$ $P_{(a. vs. c.)} = 5.1E-20^*$ $P_{(a. vs. d.)} = 6.1E-1$ $P_{(b. vs. c.)} = 3.2E-26^*$ $P_{(b. vs. d.)} = 4.8E-01$ $P_{(c. vs. d.)} = 1.2E-19^*$
a. High competency and experience within relevant subject	T	3 (1.99)	
b. Experience from teaching and research in higher education	T	1 (1.86)	
c. Experience and interest in adopting to new technologies	T	4 (2.98)	
d. Relevant leadership experience with employee-responsibilities	T	2 (1.93)	
Leadership style			$ANOVA: p = 2E-14^*$ $P_{(a. vs. b.)} = 2E-5^*$ $P_{(a. vs. c.)} = 1E+00$ $P_{(a. vs. d.)} = 4E-11^*$ $P_{(b. vs. c.)} = 3E-5^*$ $P_{(b. vs. d.)} = 7E-03$ $P_{(c. vs. d.)} = 1E-10^*$
a. Motivating leadership	T, BR	1 (1.79)	
b. Clear and goal-oriented leadership	T	2 (2.24)	
c. Open and including leadership	T, D, BR	1 (1.79)	
d. Visionary and forward-looking leadership	BR	3 (2.56)	
Competency within profession:			$P_{(ANOVA)} = 2.2E-24^*$ $P_{(a. vs. b.)} = 2.9E-8^*$ $P_{(a. vs. c.)} = 1.8E-7^*$
a. Ability to develop the professional environment	T	2 (2.11)	

nationally and internationally			$P_{(a. vs. d.)} = 2.4E-1$ $P_{(b. vs. c.)} = 1.6E-25^*$
b. Ability to be a role model for the profession	BR	4 (2.73)	$P_{(b. vs. d.)} = 7.9E-06^*$ $P_{(c. vs. d.)} = 1.3E-10^*$
c. Understanding the development of the profession and future needs	T, BR	1 (1.58)	
d. Ability to promote creativity and innovative behavior	BR, D	3 (2.24)	
Task orientation:			$P_{(ANOVA)} = 4.3E-13^*$
a. Ability to make decisions and be solution oriented	T	1 (1.67)	$P_{(a. vs. b.)} = 1.2E-2$ $P_{(a. vs. c.)} = 5.0E-14^*$
b. Ability to delegate tasks customized to each employees' competency	BR	2 (1.93)	$P_{(a. vs. d.)} = 4.6E-5$ $P_{(b. vs. c.)} = 8.0E-7^*$ $P_{(b. vs. d.)} = 1.6E-01$
c. Ability to work systematically and conscientiously	D	4 (2.50)	$P_{(c. vs. d.)} = 1.8E-4^*$
d. Ability to a good overview and control	D	3 (2.08)	
Social competency:			$P_{(ANOVA)} = 3.7E-39^*$
a. Ability to build network and good teams	T, D	1 (1.44)	$P_{(a. vs. b.)} = 3.3E-32^*$ $P_{(a. vs. c.)} = 1.8E-11^*$
b. Ability to be adaptable	D	4 (2.75)	$P_{(a. vs. d.)} = 8.9E-03$ $P_{(b. vs. c.)} = 2.2E-8^*$
c. Ability to be caring for employees	BR	3 (2.11)	$P_{(b. vs. d.)} = 9.5E-24^*$
d. Ability to show confidence in employees	D	2 (1.65)	$P_{(c. vs. d.)} = 5.1E-6^*$
Formal competency:			$P_{(ANOVA)} = 8.7E-01$
a. Higher education relevant for profession, minimum at masters' level	T	4 (2.33)	$P_{(a. vs. b.)} = 4.5E-01$ $P_{(a. vs. c.)} = 9.2E-01$ $P_{(a. vs. d.)} = 8.1E-01$
b. Higher education relevant for profession, minimum at PhD-level	T	1 (2.24)	$P_{(b. vs. c.)} = 4.6E-01$ $P_{(b. vs. d.)} = 6.1E-01$
c. Both relevant masters' degree and management education	T	3 (2.32)	$P_{(c. vs. d.)} = 8.7E-01$
d. Both relevant PhD degree and management education	T	2 (2.3)	

Table 1 Results This table shows the seven categories, each with four leadership-skills, and the average range of the skills within each category. The p-values for the ANOVA test within each category, and the p-values for the pairwise t-tests for each skill within each category are also shown. Significant p-values after Bonferroni correction (<0.0012) are marked with a star *.

In the category **Leadership experience**, the only significantly ranked skill was *Experience and interest in adopting new technologies*, which was ranked last below the three skills *Experience from teaching and research in higher education*, *Relevant leadership experience with employee-responsibilities*, and *High competency and experience within relevant subject*.

In the category **Leadership style**, the two skills *Motivating leadership* and *Open and including leadership* were ranked significantly higher than the other two *Clear and goal-oriented leadership* and *Visionary and forward-looking leadership*.

In the category **Competency within profession**, the skill *Understanding the development of the profession and future needs* was ranked as a significant number one, while *Ability to be a role model for the profession* was ranked significantly last, below the skills *Ability to develop the professional environment nationally and internationally* and *Ability to promote creativity and innovative behavior*.

In the category **Task orientation**, the skill *Ability to work systematically and conscientiously* was ranked significantly last below the three skills *Ability to make decisions and be solution oriented*, *Ability to delegate tasks customized to each employees' competency*, and *Ability to a good overview and control*.

In the category **Social competency**, the two skills *Ability to build network and good teams* and *Ability to show confidence in employees* did not differ significantly from each other but were ranked significantly higher than *Ability to be caring for employees*, which was in third place, and *Ability to be adaptable*, which was ranked significantly last.

In the last category, **Formal competency**, the skills were ranked as follows, although none of them were significantly different from the others: *Higher education relevant for profession minimum at PhD-level*, *Both relevant PhD degree and management education*, *Both relevant masters' degree and management education*, and *Higher education relevant for profession, minimum at masters' level*.

For the last category, **Formal competency**, we also conducted a sub-analysis of employees with research tasks (senior lecturer/associate professors and professors), compared to those without research tasks (lecturers/ assistant professors). The results from this sub-analysis were the same as in the main analysis, in which the four skills were not ranked significantly different from each other.

Discussion

Methodological discussion

Of the approximately 600 employees the survey was sent to, 171 responded, which gave a response rate of approximately 28%. We therefore believe that the respondents were a representative selection of employees in those two departments. However since these results are based on only responses from one university, the results are not representative outside of this university.

In the survey, employees were asked to priorities certain competences from leadership theories, and competences from the recruitment template. The two chosen leadership theories used in this study are relevant to understanding leadership competences and personality traits suitable for meeting the strategic goals at Oslo Metropolitan University (Bass & Reggio,

2005; Digman, 1990). The decision of mixing skills from the recruitment templates and those two theories made it possible to analyze the preferred skills and personal leadership traits desired by the academic staff.

We considered the potential for biases as all four researchers work at Oslo Metropolitan University, and three of us were middle managers. There could be a potential risk that our view of leadership was based on our own experiences. But we addressed this challenge by using a questionnaire based on leadership theories relevant to analyses change in our sector and the requirement templates currently used by the university. This could affect the answers, but it is not so likely, as all responders were anonymous. Afterwards, we observed that our analyses could have yielded even more findings if we had let the respondents differentiate between the six categories and rank them internally.

Discussion of results

Our respondents strongly prefer leaders with team-builder skills, but these skills are only partially expressed as required in the recruitment template. Formal competence was strongly emphasized in the templates, but the respondents did not seem to have common preferences for their middle management's formal education. This was also the case for employees with the highest formal competences. Our findings show a variety of opinions on the importance of middle management's experience from research and education, or previous leadership experience. We found stronger agreement on informal social competence.

The social competence of the middle managers, and especially the two skills *Ability to build network and good teams* and *Ability to show confidence in employees*, were emphasized as important competences for the academic staff. The strong correlation between these two preferred leadership features is interesting to see in relation to the clear indication that *Ability to be adaptable* and *Ability to be caring for employees* were the two competences with lowest rank.

In elaborating these observations, it is useful to keep in mind that academia has an inherent competitive tendency, where the pursuit for publication points, professional recognition, professional criticism, and being cited by renowned peers can be motivating, professionally inspiring, but also difficult (Fanghanel, 2011). Networking and the ability to create good teams can indicate a need for academic inspiration and collaboration that makes it possible to meet the individual competitive goals of publishing. When the respondents of this survey were so unanimous in rating networking and team building as high, this could reflect the desire for a productive collaborating work environment. This might also reflect a recognition that collaborations can create professional synergies and motivation. Another aspect is that employees had a self-interest in managers who can see their employees' professional strengths, and who are able to link this with other relevant professional competencies in new ways, thereby giving the employee the opportunity to participate in novel development and professionally relevant innovations.

To some extent, these findings indicate a demand in academia for middle management leaders with abilities to enhance transformational leadership, particularly Individualized Considerations, and *Inspirational Motivation*, two of the four "I"s in the model of Bass and Reggio (2005). A leader who can build good teams requires the ability and awareness of the

interests of each individual, a leader who knows how to enhance inner motivation, and a leader who knows how his or her employees collaborate with other colleagues.

Hence, personal contact and interest are the main prerequisites of transformational leadership, according to Bass and Reggio (2005), under the dimension *Individual Consideration*. But the closeness seems only partially to cover the need of the academics because the factor of care from the leaders was ranked low. The academic staff seemed to prefer to have *leaders* with social skills that enable them to develop fruitful frames for academic performance, not necessarily leaders who follow up with their staff through personal monitoring.

The respondents revealed that inner motivation was important, as they ranked *Ability to show trust in their employees* high. Confidence and trust are closely connected to the personality trait of agreeableness (Judge & Bono, 2000). Judge and Bono (2000) emphasize agreeableness as being closely related to successful transformational and efficient leadership. Our study supports the demand for agreeableness as a personality trait of their middle managers. Important traits for our respondents were *Motivational Leadership*, openness and inclusiveness, and the ability to build good teams. Judge and Bono (2000) include other important factors to the personal trait agreeableness: empathy, compassion, and trust; all these factors are equally important for transformational leadership. The only skill required in the recruitment template to address this was the demand for *Ability to build network and good teams*. Ability to have trust in the academic staff was not included in the announcements.

Leadership style that fosters autonomy and participation seemed to be most important to the academic staff. This was revealed in the low ranked *Visionary and forward-looking leadership*. This implies a strong wish for participation, and it shows that academic performance requires room for academic freedom (Braun et al., 2016). A visionary and charismatic leader are central elements of *Inspirational Motivation* in the four “I”s model of Bass and Reggio (2005). This can be seen as a challenge for academic freedom. A visionary and strategic thinking might be factors that the academic staff are interested in based on their discipline field and interest, but visions could be more irrelevant for their individual academic performance. This might also be the reason for the significantly low ranking of the leadership skill *Experience and interest in adopting to new technologies*. A call for a leadership style that is important to ensure participation and academic autonomy might be the reason why leadership styles of openness and inclusiveness were more favored.

The skill *Ability to work systematically and conscientiously* was ranked significantly last below the three skills *Ability to make decisions and be solution oriented*, *Ability to delegate tasks customized to each employees’ competency*, and *Ability to have good overview and control*.

How the middle managers perform their own work was less relevant than how they influence the everyday life for the employees. The academic staff seemed to appreciate leaders who are able to give direction and lean on the abilities of the employees in the best way possible for each individual. However, room for professional development did not seem to mean that the employees did not want to be led. The survey responses showed that the respondents want middle managers with the ability to make decisions and to be solution oriented. Leaders with an overview and control can make predictable frames and acknowledge the knowledge of the staff. This finding seems to mirror our findings on social competence. Our respondents preferred the personal traits of openness, inclusion, and motivating leadership style.

Openness is connected to creativity and the ability to be thoughtful and to take into account new ideas (Judge & Bono, 2000). We find this in Digman's (1990) five factor model, and Judge and Bono (2000) found these personal traits relevant for transformational leadership, particularly because they can foster *Intellectual Stimulation*, another component of the four "I"s of Bass and Reggio. The need for academic staff to ask for involvement and openness by their leaders might mirror the chore elements of their everyday tasks: to be active, participatory, and a will to generate new understandings. *Open and inclusive leadership* and the ability to be solution-oriented are both requirements covered in the recruitment template of Oslo Metropolitan University.

A desire for participation and academic performance, and a wish that a leader is a professional guarantor might be underlying causes of the respondents' answers within the category *Competency within profession*. The skill *Understanding the development of the profession and future needs* is ranked significantly as number one. The *Ability to be a role model for the profession* is ranked significantly last, below the skills *Ability to develop the professional environment nationally and internationally* and *Ability to promote creativity and innovative behavior*.

This might be related to employee's desire for leaders who can strengthen the profession's place and recognition in society, and that a solid "outsiders view" on their own profession can create a relevant direction for the institution's overall tasks. It can also daily express a desire for a leader with a common language, common references, and the same view of professional quality as the employees. The fact that the manager is a recognized professional does not have a direct effect on the employees' daily work. For the professionals, it seems more important to have a leader who ensures future-oriented development of the profession, and who provides appropriate support structures for employees so that the individual employee can contribute to the development of relevant professional competencies. The leader is the one who takes the lead and gives the employees a good financial framework, relevant equipment, and infrastructure in which they can develop their professionalism.

Hence, the middle manager must be able to be a relevant link between the profession and the employee when it comes to professional knowledge, and to be a facilitator for this. With a vigilant double eye, both on external requirements and internal resources, the middle manager will be able to initiate cooperation and put the right competencies together to ensure the social responsibility the institution have. This indicates a desire from employees to have a leader as a professional guarantor rather than a professional role model.

Here, we observed a pattern: the academic staff asks for leaders open for academic influence, a leader who ensures space and room for academic performance, and a leader who can point out the academic direction. Only some of the components of transformational leadership are favored, particularly the elements of *inspirational motivation* (Bass & Reggio, 2005), but this is not dependent on the personal and charismatic leader. The component of *inspirational motivation* seems to be double-edged, on one side favored if the leader can foster academic motivation; however, they are less dependent on leaders as personal motivators, and close and caring leaders.

Motivational leadership seems to be relevant for academics if it requires appropriate frames to perform high quality academic performance. Bass and Raggio (2005) describe transformational leaders as leaders who are admired, respected, trusted, and often charismatic.

Our findings indicate a wish for leaders who foster inner motivation and an academic gatekeeper, a guarantor of quality more than a personal and professional role model.

Transformational leadership required for middle managers in academia?

Our findings indicate that academics at Oslo Metropolitan University ask for managers who are able to perform an art of balance of relevant directions but also to provide the employees with autonomy. This expresses, on the one hand, that some elements of transformational leadership seem desirable. Academics seem to prefer leaders with a profound understanding of the profession and its future. This expresses a need for frames and direction to enhance relevant research and education. On the other hand, they favored leaders who are able to have trust in the academic staff, open and inclusive. Clearly, charismatic and visionary transformational leadership style were not necessarily favored by academics.

The need for autonomy needs to be understood as a consequence of the meritorious systems of academia and the rewards for research published in prestigious journals. This requires room for creativity and self-efficacy leadership to some extent. At the same time, this leadership system is more in line with transactional leadership: academics provide the university with teaching research, publish the work, and the institution gets the scores, funding, reputation and prestige (Martinsen, 2019). This is transitioned from the academics, and in return, they get the possibilities to climb the hierarchy and increase their status and position—and to some extent higher wages. This implies an inherent system of transactional and self-efficacy leadership—all out of the middle management's control.

Interestingly, even if this system requires autonomy and independent employees, we still find a desired for middle management to be able to create good teams, to make decisions and be solution-oriented, and to be leaders who understand the development of the profession and future needs. To a great extent, these favored skills and leadership styles were mirrored in the recruitment strategy of Oslo Metropolitan University. However, the recruitment strategy does not explicitly ask for leaders who are able to show trust and ensure academics' autonomy in their daily work.

Summing up, we have revealed a demand for a hybrid of leadership with components of both transformational and self-efficacy leadership in an institutional system of transactional leadership. The transactions are embedded in expectations of academics to climb the ladder of success through R&D work and citations. Within this competitive and meritorious system, an important factor for academic staff is that leaders must have a profound understanding of the profession they lead; they need some scientific knowledge and skills, but leaders must also be able to motivate and lead their staff effectively (Peus et al., 2009).

This implies, the three-stage ladder of Martinsen et al (2019) describing a past, present and the future models of relevant leadership in modern organization, is only partial relevant to understand the present need for leading change in academia. Academics ask for autonomy and academic freedom, but not self-efficacy leadership as the highest good. Some elements of transformational leadership are highly appreciated. A trusted, empathic, skilled and wise leader who can give support and lead the academics in a relevant direction, is preferred. Understanding good leadership in academia in shifting times, requires elements of all three leadership models; transactional, transformational and self-efficacy leadership.

Conclusions: The needs and the gap

Management in academia has some challenges: the leader should secure both academic freedom, but they must make sure that they follow external orders and governmental demands. This is not necessarily contradictory. This is supported by our results: the employees demand middle managers with professional insight and awareness; judgement, and power of action to secure high quality. How does this correspond with the theories of transformational leadership, personal traits—theory about efficient leadership, and the recruitment strategy at a modern university like Oslo Metropolitan University?

The profound characteristic of the rewards system and expected behavior is outside of the middle managers influence. Because the demands for publication of research, citation, and other important reward systems are embedded in the university structure and strategy, employees are continuously striving to fulfil the required publications acquirements. This is important in everyday life for academics and requires autonomy and self-efficacy.

In this study, we observed a certain mismatch between leadership theory, the recruitment strategy for middle management at Oslo Metropolitan University, and the academic employee's preferences regarding leadership skills. The analysis clearly indicates that the employees appreciate a leader with skills that have direct implications for every individual's own motivation and work, rather than skills that are linked to the leader's characteristics. The respondents highlighted middle managers' professional integrity, which implies credibility and the ability to take good decisions. This can be understood in the context of the need for employee's autonomy in academia.

These findings reveal a need for recruitment strategies that fit with the academic middle management shift, which ensure that middle managers are able to drive employees' inner motivation, and possess the personality traits for relevant direction in educational changes and research. Hence, it seems important for the middle manager to have legitimacy and trust to build good teams.

The middle manager's formal skills are, according to our findings, irrelevant for the employee's potential to achieve the strategic goals. If the middle management recruitment strategy of the university requires formal competency at the PhD level, this calls for an additional awareness of the leaders' social skills and professional insight. Accordingly, it seems wise to require middle managers with vigilance for the future innovation and development of the profession.

Further research is needed to elaborate on the consequences of the required demand for formal competence at the PhD level for middle managers. Future studies should examine the extent to which this strategy is appropriate to ensure study programs and relevant research that meet the needs of a fast-changing society and the private and public sectors, where a natural starting point will be to examine whether these results apply for other universities as well.

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