

# Managerial Competencies of Municipal Recreationists in Ontario<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

The continuing and future success of leisure service agencies in the public sector is increasingly dependent upon competent managers. Especially in times of greater fiscal restraint, many municipal recreation departments are adopting a more business-like approach to management. However, there are a number of problems which could hinder this transition. First, those in managerial positions may not have sufficient training in the areas in which they are now being expected to perform. Second, there has been little research on exactly what managerial competencies are required in the public sector. Third, there has been little analysis of how municipal recreationists are currently spending their time on management-related tasks and whether the time spent corresponds to the types of activities that are deemed important for managerial effectiveness in the public sector.

There are four managerial functions which are commonly referred to in the management literature, the performance of which are thought to be essential for competent management. The four functions are *planning*, *organising*, *directing*, and *controlling*, and each is composed of a number of underlying activities. These activities are the embodiment of "managerial competencies" which are defined as the "underlying characteristics of a person in that they may be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses" (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 21). Managerial competencies, then, are realised or manifested in the importance placed on, time spent in, and proficiency of performance of these various activities.

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the managerial competencies of recreationists working in municipal parks and recreation departments in Ontario. The specific foci of the study were:

1. the degree of importance of each of the four management functions and their underlying competency areas to the proficient performance of the recreationists' jobs;
2. the amount of time currently being devoted to each of the competency areas; and
3. the self-perceived level of proficiency in each of the competency areas.

Information on such factors as the respondent's level of management, years of experience, type of educational preparation, age, and sex, as well as the size and type of organisational structure was gathered to determine if any relationships existed between these aspects and the results concerning managerial competencies. The identification of exactly "what is that municipal service providers do when they manage" in addition to the competency areas upon which they rely provides valuable and practical information for professional development and other personnel management needs (e.g. recruitment, selection, training and development).

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## **METHOD**

The study was conducted in two principal phases. The first phase involved the identification of the specific competencies directly pertaining to management activities in the public recreation sector. The second phase involved the surveying of municipal recreationists in Ontario concerning the importance placed on and time spent in each of these areas.

A number of strategies were used in phase one to develop the list of managerial competencies. First, a review of the literature on managerial functions and competencies was undertaken and this resulted in the identification of those activities recognised in the management literature as being of generic importance. Second, related studies in recreation management were reviewed to assess which competency areas were seen as most important by recreationists (e.g. Klar, 1980; Downing et al., 1983; Busser and Bannon, 1987; Jamieson, 1987; Slack, 1987; Hare and Frisby, 1989; Smale and Luyks-Ledgerwood, 1989). Third, semi-focused interviews were conducted with a sample of nine municipal recreationists who have a variety of managerial responsibilities to gather further insights into the activities that comprise the four functions of management. The interview subjects were asked to differentiate between the managerial and non-managerial aspects of their jobs, and were then provided with definitions of the four functions of management and asked to:

1. estimate the total percentage of their time that was currently spent in each function;
2. describe the related activities normally carried out under each function; and
3. provide specific examples of their work activities by referring to major projects that they had undertaken within the last year.

They also were asked to estimate the percentage of time that was spent managing on one's own, with other staff in the agency, and with people outside the agency (e.g. general public, other agencies). These strategies employed in phase one of the study ensured that the managerial competencies identified were directly relevant to the activities and responsibilities of managers in the municipal recreation sector.

Phase two of the study involved the development of a self-administered questionnaire that incorporated the managerial competencies identified in phase one. The questionnaire was distributed to 537 full-time municipal recreationists who were members of either the Ontario Recreation Society (ORS) or the Society of Directors of Municipal Recreation of Ontario (SDMRO). The questionnaire was divided into three parts: (1) the first part asked respondents to indicate along a 7-point scale the importance of each of the four management functions and to estimate the percentage of time spent in each; (2) the second part asked respondents to indicate along 7-point scales the importance of each of the managerial competencies (identified in phase one) were to their job functioning as well as how proficient they perceived themselves to be at each; in addition, the respondents estimated the time spent in each competency area; and (3) the third part asked the respondents to provide details describing their agencies including the organisational size and structure, and information concerning their personal characteristics. Subsequent analyses focused upon the relationships between ratings of the importance of and perceived proficiency in each of the competency areas as a means of identifying professional development needs in the field. Differences were between distinct organisational settings were sought to help explain these relationships.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Of the 537 questionnaires mailed out, 36 did not reach the intended respondents, due largely to incorrect or unknown addresses, and 310 were returned in usable form for an effective response rate of 61.9%. A preliminary analysis of the results of the survey revealed that all four of

the management functions were generally regarded as relatively important to municipal recreationists.

However, a number of differences occurred with respect to the individual managerial competencies rated by the respondents. Variations were found not only with respect to the importance placed on these competency areas, but also in terms of the proficiency municipal recreationists perceived they possessed in each. As expected, these variations were typically associated with the amount of time reported being spent in each area. Interestingly, while the four main functions were recognised as having some generic importance (as in other sectors), several of the competencies identified in phase one that were *specific* to municipal recreationists also were deemed to be of particular importance. This finding reinforces the basic premise that the public sector — and especially in the case of the recreation field — has managerial responsibilities that are unique to it.

Differences between level of management and the sex of the respondents in the importance placed on and in the perceived proficiency at several of the competency areas were identified. Differences were even more pronounced for these subgroups with respect to the amount of time spent in each competency area. These variations were largely accounted for by the discrepancies between the sexes in the level of management they had attained (i.e. fewer women with higher management responsibilities and consequently less time in associated activities). Many of the differences identified point to areas where professional development and training can narrow the gap between the importance of and the proficiency in managerial activities. Further, better definitions of the nature of municipal recreationists' jobs at varying levels of management through the analysis of the time spent in the various competency areas will lead to better management practices and more effective allocation of job responsibilities.

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