6 Leadership as a skill

Chapter aims

- ☐ Introduces the concept of leadership as a skill
- ☐ Explore Mumford's approach to leadership skills
- ☐ Understand the difference between a skill and a competency
- ☐ Critically examine competency theory
- ☐ Understand the variety of competencies that have been identified as important to event leadership
- ☐ Focus on leadership in action: the skills you need to be a successful event manager, by David Strafford of Hopper Events.

Leadership as a skill

In both the event industry, and in scholarly research, leadership is often considered as a skill. This school of thought is closely related to the trait theories of leadership, as conceptually, it is hard to differentiate between the personality traits leaders possess and the skills that they demonstrate. What is the difference between the terms? Well, it is widely accepted that traits are innate, but skills can be learnt (Athey & Orth, 1999). So, skills differ from traits because they are considered to be something that can be developed – a practised ability. A skill is the ability to do a job well, particularly if you have practiced it. This school of thought therefore suggests that you might not be a 'natural leader', but you can develop the necessary set of skills that will allow you to become a good one. As such, you can develop the capabilities required to lead (Mumford et al., 2000b).

This area of leadership study suggests that leadership depends on an 'interactive package of complex skills' (Mumford et al., 2000a, p. 156). Mumford and his colleagues (2000a) present a skills-based model

of leadership performance, which suggests that the performance of a leader is based on three key types of skills:

1 Complex problem-solving skills

2 Solution construction skills

3 Social judgement skills

In other words, effective leaders must define problems, gather information, formulate ideas and construct a plan to solve a problem. They must then ensure that others are willing to work towards these solutions with them, which requires social skills such as persuasion, negotiation, judgement and decision-making. Mumford et al. (2000a) suggest that, in order to be an effective leader, individuals must also have a body of knowledge or expertise.

Whilst there was a lot of interest in leadership skills at the turn of the century, this focus is now thought to be too simplistic. The criticism here is similar to those arguments about the inadequacy of the trait theories (see Chapter 2) - namely that reducing leadership to a list of measurable skills ignores the myriad of other inputs to leadership, such as behaviours, context or the followers themselves. However, scholars have not completely rejected the idea that there might exist a set of capabilities that result in effective leadership. Instead, they take a broader view, moving from the term *leadership skills* to *leadership competencies*.

The terms skills and competences are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. A skill is a specific ability, normally related to certain tasks, whereas a competency tends to incorporate more than just a set of skills – if applied correctly, the term should also acknowledge knowledge, behaviours and traits or abilities. These competency-based theories of leadership therefore recognise that people can learn different sorts of leadership competencies in order to lead in different styles.

Competency based leadership

The earliest work on competencies was by McClelland (1973), who viewed them in a very broad way, as a behavioural attribute that contributed to success. This view of what people do in order to be successful led to the development of competency profiling. Here competencies are defined as skills, motives, traits, abilities or personal characteristics that lead to effective job performance in leadership or

managerial occupations (Boyatzis, 1982, 2009; Koenigsfeld et al., 2011; Sandwith, 1993). These competencies can be technical, intellectual or emotional in nature.

♦ **Technical** – or managerial – competencies can be described as an understanding of, and proficiency in, a specific kind of activity (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018).

♦ **Intellectual** competencies are the cognitive abilities of an individual – their IQ and their ability to use the knowledge or insight from their own intelligence.

♦ **Emotional** competencies are defined as the leader's emotional intelligence – the ability to define and manage your own emotions, and those of the people around you. Emotionally intelligent people use the emotional information they gather to guide their own behaviours.

Scholars researching competencies in leadership are therefore concerned with identifying the specific competencies within each of these three areas that contribute to the development of successful leaders.

Competency views of leadership can, in many ways, be seen as little more than an extension of the trait theories of leadership (Clarke, 2012) – scholars are still often only concerned with what skills the individual leader possesses, and competency theories of leaderships often result in a list of skills that detail the knowledge that people need in order to successfully do their jobs (e.g. Dulewicz & Higgs, 2005; Koenigsfeld et al., 2011; MBECS, 2011; Müller & Turner, 2010; Sandwith, 1993). This focus on producing a list of skills for successful leadership is actually very useful for the event industry, as it gives those responsible for recruitment and training something specific to work towards. In recent years, the rapid change to the global environment have resulted in changes to the strategic focus of the event industry, and one of the key issues is that of the fast turnover of staff, which creates both strategic and operational human resource management issues for event organisations. To meet these challenges, and to overcome the related challenges in recruitment and retention, much academic research in events, tourism and hospitality has focussed on relevant competencies and skill sets (e.g. Chung-Herrera, Enz & Lankau, 2003; Johanson et al., 2011; MBECS, 2011).