Predicting A Manager's Level of Commitment, And Ability To Perform Under Pressure

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The ability to perform at high levels, making sound, timely decisions, without losing sight of the bigger picture, and/or long term objectives, is becoming increasingly critical for today's managers. Perhaps the most significant challenge facing most global-organizations, involves the identification, selection, and development of individuals who are capable of performing at the middle and senior management levels.

From a succession planning perspective, a majority of today's global companies are having difficulty, finding individuals who have the necessary skill sets to perform at high levels under the kind of pressure that exists within an international business environment. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, the competitiveness of today's market place requires a great deal in the way of commitment and dedication from management teams. Second, the skill sets which contribute to success at the supervisory and front line management levels within organizations, are different from the skill sets which contribute to success at senior levels.

At EPS, we are fortunate in that we have assessment data in the form of scores on The Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS) inventory, interview data, and on going behavioral observations on a large number of managers working in a global environment. TAIS provides us with information about the types of concentration, and interpersonal skills required by managers at different levels within the organization. Below, I have summarized the critical differences between managers at various levels within a couple of the organizations we work with, based on their scores on TAIS. These differences help to explain the challenges being faced as we attempt to develop and expand management teams. Table 1 provides a summary of the number of managers tested, at various levels of management, within the organizations.
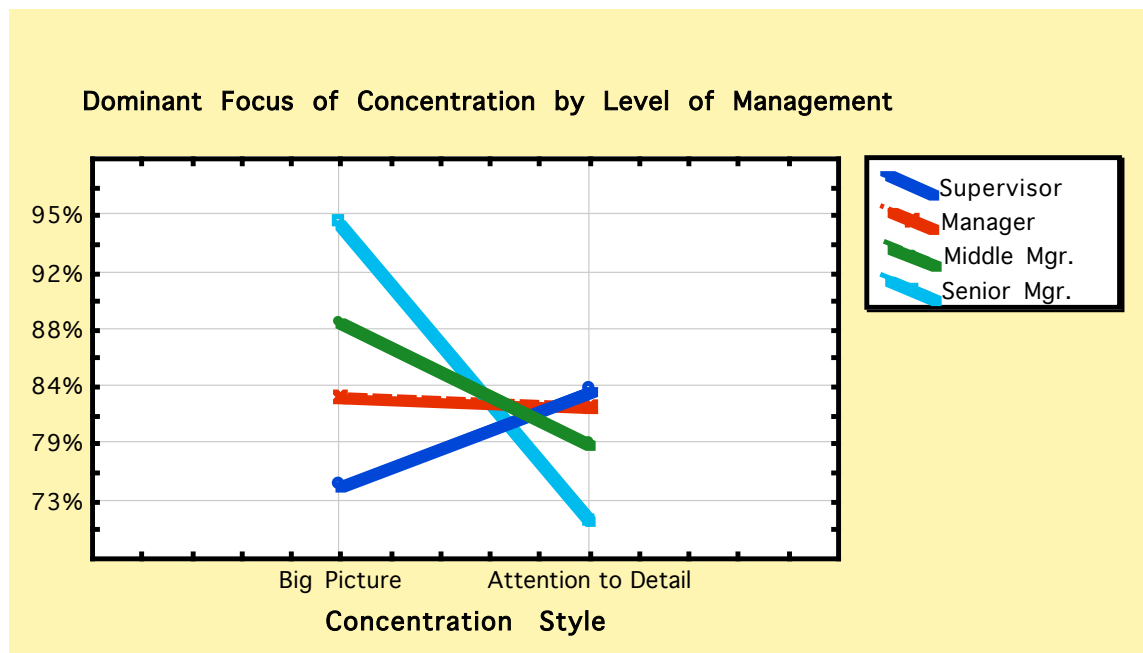
Table 1`
Management Level by Gender

Gender	Supervisors	Managers	Middle Managers	Senior Managers	Total
Males **% of Total**	33 11%	107 35%	65 21%	26 9%	231 76%
Females **% of Total**	18 6%	36 12%	18 6%	1 0.3%	73 24%
Total N **% Totals**	51 17%	143 47%	83 27%	27 9%	304 100%

The Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS) inventory measures twenty different, performance relevant, concentration skills and interpersonal characteristics. Those twenty characteristics can be thought of as the building blocks upon which relatively complicated human behaviors are built. To be a good extrovert for example, you need to be aware of and sensitive to your surroundings (BET on TAIS), you need to enjoy spending time with others (EXT on TAIS), and you need to be an individual who is positive and supportive of others (PAE on TAIS). These three TAIS scales or building blocks of extroversion are often combined in TAIS results, to create an extroversion factor score.

Critical Concentration Skills

In the material that follows, I have focused on those specific TAIS scales, and/or factors that appear to be critical differentiators of success at various levels with rapidly growing global companies. Figure 1 shows the critical concentration skill differences between front line managers and senior managers.

Figure 1
Management Level and Dominant Concentration Style

The percentile scores shown on the left side of Figure 1, indicate where various levels of management score in comparison to the general population. The graph examines two types of concentration. First, it shows how the different groups scored on the TAIS scale which measures analytical skills, the ability to problem solve, to think strategically, and to see the big picture. Second, it looks at the groups' scores on the TAIS scale measuring focus and attention to detail.

As you can see, senior managers are dominated by their analytical skills. They are big picture thinkers, and don't get bogged down in the details. In fact, they are significantly less detail oriented than the other three management groups. It can be pointed out that the differences between all four management groups, on the TAIS scale measuring strategic thinking (BIT) are significant. As we would expect, supervisors are the lowest on this scale, followed by managers, directors and AGM's, and then senior managers.

Supervisors, are the most detail oriented followed by managers, middle managers, and senior managers. The critical point, here, is that it is focus and attention to detail that leads to success in front line management positions, and the ability to think strategically and see the big picture that is critical at higher levels in the organization. Indeed, it is the tendency of too many mid level managers to get bogged down in details, to be too hands on, that leads to their failure. We have seen this happen time and time again within the organizations we work with.

Two Critical Points About Concentration Skills

I want to draw your attention to two critical points relative to the concentration skills information that has been provided to this point. First, if you look at the percentile scores in comparison to the general population, you will see that the scores of all managers, on both types of concentration are relatively high. Senior managers are lowest on attention to detail, but their average score is at the 70th percentile. The point here is that we are looking for highly skilled people, and there isn't a large pool to pull from.

Second, we have enough repeat TAIS data, and/or data on individuals within the these organizations that was collected several years ago, to know what some of the senior managers skills were, when they were in middle, and even front line management positions. What we can see, is that their scores haven't changed that much. In other words, people rarely start out in low level management positions with concentration skills that are ideal for that position, and then grow, develop, or evolve their skills, so that they become the skill sets required at higher levels. From a selection and development standpoint, the implications of this should be obvious. We need to look for, and identify, senior management skill sets earlier in employee's careers.

Concentration Errors

In addition to measuring concentration skills, TAIS allows us to measure the types of mistakes managers are likely to make. From a concentration and/or decision making standpoint, there are three types of mistakes that are fairly common in most organizations. These three mistakes are presented in Figure 2. Once again, as you look at figure two, keep in mind that the percentage scores at the left side of the figure show how the different management groups compare to the general population. As you can see, when compared with the general population, managers make relatively few errors (highest score is around the 26th percentile). What we can't tell, from the graph, is how critical any given mistake might be. I may make fewer errors than 95% of the population, but the mistakes I make, because of my position, may have much greater negative impact on me, and on the organization, than the mistakes others make.

Figure 2

Concentration Errors

Concentration Errors As A Function of Level of Manager

	Supervisor
	Manager
	Middle Mgr.
	Senior Mgr.

27%
21%
16%
12%
8%

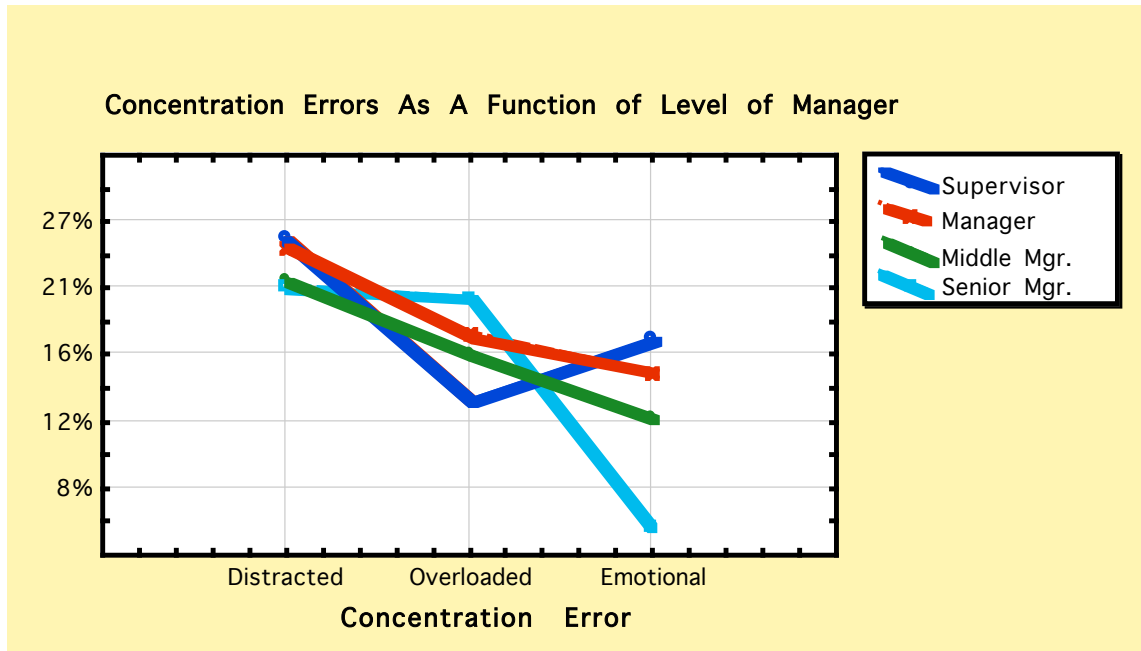Distracted   Overloaded   Emotional

Concentration Error

Figure 2, shows the three different concentration errors or mistakes people make. The first type of mistake occurs when a person become distracted at a critical time, by something going on around him/her (OET on TAIS). This is the most common mistake made within many of today's organizations, and does not differ as a function of level of management. It is simply a reflection of the business or work environment, and the high level of demand placed on all of the managers in these organizations.

The second type of mistake occurs when an individual thinks too much, overloading and confusing him/herself, or others. Supervisors, who are the least strategic of the management groups, are significantly less likely than senior managers to become overloaded and/or confused. The other differences between management levels in this area are not statistically significant.

The third type of mistake occurs when emotions get out of control. As emotional arousal increases, there is a breakdown in a person's ability to shift from an external focus of concentration (reading and reacting to the environment), to an internal focus of concentration (analyzing, anticipating and predicting). High levels of anxiety cause people to become stuck in their head, and they make mistakes because they lose awareness of things going on around them. High levels of anger cause people to become stuck on things going on around them. When people are angry, the often fail to slow down to analyze and plan out their actions. They react without thinking.

As you can see, there are significant differences between management groups when it comes to keeping emotions from interfering with their ability to make sound

decisions. Senior managers, make fewer errors, than mid level managers, who make fewer errors than front line managers and supervisors.

Critical Points About Concentration Errors

We can learn from our mistakes. There are two things that can be done to make managers more effective. First, distractions are particularly troublesome, because it is distractions that interfere with follow through. Follow through in every organization is absolutely critical. Because the environments of most global companies, are so busy, we need to do more to minimize distractions, and/or to provide external reminders of key responsibilities to insure follow through. The operative word here, is "external" reminders. Individual's cannot trust themselves, and/or their memories alone, and expect to follow through.

Second, as managers grow within organizations they can become more mature, and gain greater control over the negative impact that their emotions can have on decision making processes and behavior. We can reduce emotional mistakes with mentoring, and training around anger management, and effective confrontation.

Key Performance Clusters or Factors

There are two clusters of TAIS behaviors, or factors, that are absolutely critical to success at the management level, within most global organizations. The first of these, consists of the ability to perform at a high level under pressure (e.g., when time lines are tight, the customer is being extremely critical and demanding, responsibilities seem almost overwhelming). The second, revolves around having the desire and energy to make the kind of total commitment to the organization that the business requires.
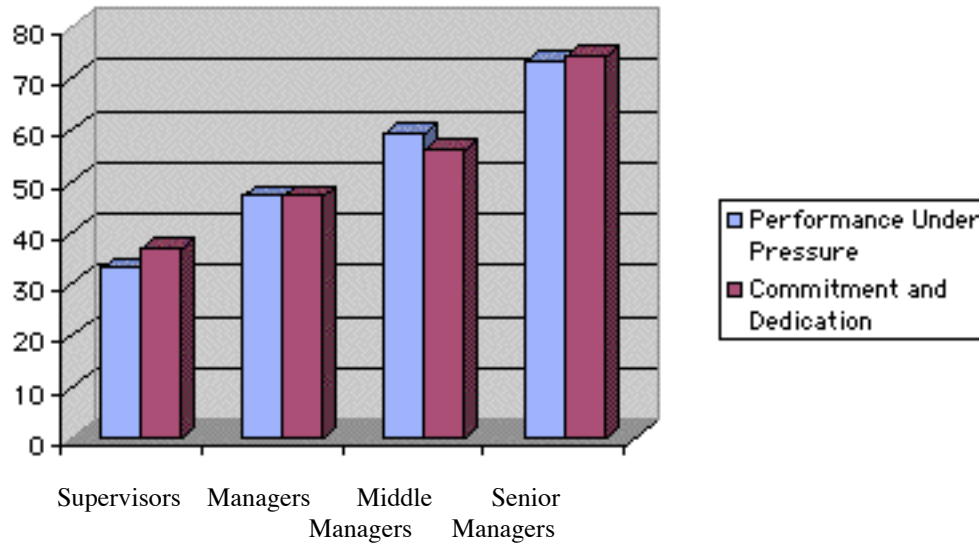
Performance Under Pressure

The building blocks of the ability to perform under pressure in a business environment consist of: 1) Strategic thinking, and the ability to see the broader picture (BIT); 2) The ability to make quick decisions (OBS); 3) Confidence in one's ability to execute and be successful (SES), and; 4) The desire to be in a leadership or decision making role, when the pressure is on (PUP). These four TAIS scales have been combined into a single measure of performance under pressure, which is shown in Figure 3.

Commitment and Dedication

The TAIS building blocks that contribute to the type of commitment and dedication required include the following: 1) An incredibly high level of energy, the ability to multi-task, and the enjoyment of change (INFP); 2) Competitiveness, and the willingness to go head to head with others, the desire to win (P/O), and; 3) The willingness, to make sacrifices over long periods of time, in order to accomplish goals and objectives (FOT). These three TAIS scales have been combined into a single cluster or factor reflecting dedication and commitment, and are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Commitment And Performance Under Pressure At Different Levels of Management

Commitment And Performance Under Pressure At Different Levels of Management

As you can see from Figure 3, scores on the TAIS factors reflecting commitment and dedication, and the ability to perform under pressure increase at each level of management. Statistically, senior managers score significantly higher on both of these clusters, than the other three management levels. Both middle managers, and managers score significantly higher on the performance under pressure cluster than supervisors. In addition, the middle management group scores significantly higher on the commitment cluster than the supervisor group. As you can see from Figure 3, the tendency for scores to increase as you move higher in management is extremely consistent.

Critical Points About Commitment and Performance Under Pressure

First, in contrast to the percentile scores shown in the previous graphs, the scores on the left of Figure 3, show how the management groups compare with each other. In other words, the cluster scores were developed based not on the scores of people in the general population, but instead on the scores of all of the managers. Thus, supervisors scoring at the 30th percentile on performance under pressure, are being compared to the entire management population.

The second point to keep in mind when looking at this figure, is the fact that at least 70 percent of the variability in scores between the various groups is due to very stable trait like characteristics. Skills like the ability to analyze and problem solve, the ability to process a lot of information, and even a high energy level, have strong genetic components. This means we should be able to identify individuals who have the type of

commitment, dedication, and ability to perform under pressure required at senior levels, very early in their careers.

Conclusions

I am going to keep my remarks here very brief. Success in most of today's rapidly changing organizations demands improvement in the areas of talent identification, management development, and succession planning. Development does not mean teaching people things from the ground up, and/or developing new skill sets. Instead, development means taking the rough edges off of skill sets that individuals already have. To be successful, most organizations must do two things:

1. Do a better job of ensuring that the skill sets required for success at a senior management level are already evident when they go outside of the organization to hire people at junior levels.
2. Do a better job of identifying and developing hi-potentials within the organization. Getting people on the radar screen early so the rough edges can be developed, and so valuable talent isn't lost to the competition.