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ASSESSING CHINESE MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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In this study we investigated assessments of managerial competency in the context of Chinese local government public officials. Based on data collected from a 2008 survey conducted in China's Jiangsu Province and drawing on the competing values framework developed by Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1981, 1983), we examined discrepancies in the assessment of managerial competencies through the supervisors' self-assessments of their own competencies, subordinates' self-assessments of their own competencies, supervisors assessments of their subordinates' competencies, and subordinates' assessments of their supervisors' competencies. We found that, significant differences existed between the managerial competency assessments of public officials with leadership positions and the assessments of their subordinates. This calls into question the validity and effectiveness of supervisors' assessments and peer assessments of managerial competencies in Chinese government. We offer both general and specific policy suggestions for improving the measurement of managerial competencies in China.

Keywords: managerial competencies, competing values framework, supervisor assessments, peer assessments, government, China.

In China, public officials at the local government level play a very important role in implementing public policies and carrying out daily administration (Jing & Savas, 2009; Tsao & Worthley, 2009). Moreover, due to China's unique political and economic environment, most public officials are the cadres of the ruling Chinese Community Party (CCP). Public officials' performance influences not only local economic and social development and the quality of life of local people, but also the image and legitimacy of the ruling party (Zhou, 2007). Therefore, since the inception of the CCP in the 1920s, particularly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, recruiting and grooming competent party cadres and public officials have been top priorities of the CCP and its government (Zhou, 2004). Before the "reform and open-up" policy adopted in the late 1970s, however, political loyalty was considered to be the most important competency of party cadres and civil servants, and other competencies were largely overlooked (Shang & Li, 2006). In the course of China's opening-up and market-oriented economic reforms, the country has been experiencing unprecedented political, economic, and social changes, which significantly challenge its governance capacity (Li & Zhou, 2005). Given the increasingly important role that the Chinese government is playing in promoting economic development, maintaining social stability, and addressing these political, social and economic challenges, managerial competencies of public officials are becoming increasingly important (Hannah, 2003).

The low efficiency and productivity of Chinese government, however, has been largely attributed to the lack of public officials' managerial competencies (Public Managerial Competency Survey Team, 2006). An added complication is that public officials in leadership positions think their subordinates are incompetent, and subordinates also have a negative view of their leaders' managerial capabilities (Public Managerial Competency Survey Team, 2006). This mutual distrust is considered one of the most significant barriers to improving organizational performance (Shang, 2007). However, few empirical studies have been conducted to date to examine these discrepancies.

In this article, we made a preliminary attempt to fill this gap in the literature. Our first aim was to ascertain empirically to what extent discrepancies exist between the managerial evaluations of Chinese public officials with leadership positions and of their subordinates. Second, given the existence of the discrepancies, our goal was to explore their causes and propose policies to address them. Because of the complexity of the Chinese political system and government structure, and the importance of local public officials in implementing public policy and delivering public services (Andornino & Wilcox, 2006; Zang, 2001), we focused on public officials working at the local government level.

Literature Review

Managerial Competencies and the Competing Values Framework

As they face increasingly fierce global competition and market uncertainties in a turbulent time, organizations worldwide have recognized that people are the most important resource for sustainable organizational development (Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2008; Tzafrir, Meshoulam, & Baruch, 2007). Traditional personnel administration has given way to human resource management emphasizing employee development and growth (Panayotopoulou, Vakola, & Galanaki, 2007; West, Guthrie, Dawson, Borrill, & Carter, 2006). Organizations have begun to invest heavily in employee training, coaching, and development activities and programs (Becker & Huselid, 2006). These human resource development efforts usually begin with managerial competency assessment (Muratbekova-Touron, 2009). Organizations employ a variety of strategies and measures to identify which managerial competencies are important, and how to improve their employees' abilities in these areas (Dewey, Montrosse, Schröter, Sullins, & Mattox, 2008). Based on the appropriate diagnostics, organizations can develop and adopt training programs to recruit and train employees accordingly (Batt, 2002).

Given the difficulties in diagnosing and assessing managerial competencies, multi-evaluator assessment or 360-degree appraisal has been widely adopted (Dewey et al., 2008). For example, almost all Fortune 500 companies use 360-degree appraisal for human resource development (Stoker & Van der Heijden, 2001). In a 360-degree appraisal, employees are asked to assess their own managerial competencies as well as those of their peers, including their coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates (Bartram, 2004). Researchers believe that the comprehensive multiperspective assessment can allow a comprehensive and objective picture of managerial competencies to be drawn (Von Krosigk, 2007).

Of the various managerial competency evaluation schemes available, the competing values framework (CVF) is one of the most influential and widely adopted (Ancarani, Di Mauro, & Giammanco, 2009; Belasen & Frank, 2008). This framework reflects the complex and paradoxical roles that organizational managers at different levels play (Faerman, Quinn, Thompson, & McGrath, 1990; Patterson et al., 2005; Quinn, 1984, 1988). In this framework it is suggested that effective managers need to play mutually contradictory roles in order to accomplish organizational goals (Quinn & McGrath, 1985; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981, 1983). At the same time that a manager needs to focus on goal attainment and be task oriented, he or she also needs to be people oriented, or concerned with the needs and welfare of his or her employees (Quinn &

Rohrbaugh, 1981, 1983). In addition, a manager needs to maintain a stable organization and focus on rules, procedures, and internal processes, and at the same time keep organizational structure and procedure flexible and adaptive to environmental changes (Quinn & McGrath, 1985).

Proponents of CVF argue that, to achieve organizational effectiveness, managers need to perform eight different roles: mentor, facilitator, monitor, coordinator, director, producer, innovator, and broker (Quinn, 1988). By performing these different roles, managers can handle mutually contradictory aspects of organizational dynamics (Faerman et al., 1990). Quinn (1984, 1988) stated that, in order to play each managerial role successfully, managers need to master three managerial competencies. Researchers have shown that effective and successful managers are those who are able to perform all the eight roles adeptly and capitalize on the total 24 managerial competencies in different settings (Faerman et al., 1990). Drawing upon the CVF, Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, and McGrath (2000) developed a questionnaire containing 120 items to assess managers' competencies in organizations. The reliability and validity of this instrument has been tested by management scholars and practitioners worldwide (Ancarani et al., 2009).

Although Chinese government officials have been focusing on improving the quality of managerial competencies, few empirical studies in China have been carried out to examine and assess the level of public officials' competencies (Zhou, 2007). In this study we drew upon the CVF, the instrument designed by Quinn et al. (2000), and a 360-degree evaluation to a) assess Chinese local government officials' managerial competencies preliminarily, and b) examine managerial competencies from two perspectives: how public officials assessed their own managerial competencies as well as those of their supervisors, and how supervisors evaluated their own competencies as well as those of their subordinates.

Method

Sample

Because of constraints such as time and financial resources, we chose public officials in Jiangsu Province as the sample population for our competencies study. Jiangsu Province has more than 70 million residents and is divided into two areas, northern Jiangsu and southern Jiangsu, by the Yangtze River. The differences in economic and social development in the two sections, to a large degree, resemble those between northern China and southern China (Jiangsu Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Therefore, we believed that our findings from participants in Jiangsu Province would be generalizable to China as a whole.

We diversified our sample population in terms of localities and demographics

as best as possible, and finally identified a sample frame containing 300 public officials without leadership positions (subordinate participant group) and 50 public officials with leadership positions (supervisor participant group) who directly supervised the subordinate group. Among the sample of public officials, 45 (15%) were women, and the total number of female supervisors was 8 (16%). The sample of public officials we chose varied from the provincial level to the town level and from government to semigovernment organizations (called "Shiye units" in mainland China).

Measures and Procedure

Drawing on the instrument designed by Quinn et al. (2000) and customizing it to fit the Chinese language and environment, we developed a survey containing 120 statements regarding public officials' managerial competencies. Respondents were asked to express their attitudes toward all these statements on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. In order to validate this customized survey, 150 undergraduates studying for the degree of Master of Public Administration who worked for the Chinese government completed the survey as a pretest. The pretest showed acceptable levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was 0.871 and Cronbach's alphas for subscales ranged from 0.800 to 0.917), and test-retest reliability (the intraclass correlation coefficient [ICC] for test-retest reliability was 0.869 for the total scale and ranged from 0.756 to 0.900 for subscales) at the 95% confidence level. Confirmatory factor analysis of the instrument also revealed acceptable reliabilities (χ^2/df = 1.994, p = .001, root mean square error of approximation = .071, comparative fit index = .910, incremental fit index = .921, goodness-of-fit index = .914, adjusted goodness-of-fit index = 0.900, normed fit index = .907, nonnormed fit index = .910).

We mailed two copies of the same survey with stamped, addressed return envelopes to the group of subordinate participants. One survey was for subordinates to self-evaluate managerial competencies and the other one was for subordinates to evaluate managerial competencies of their supervisors. We also mailed seven copies of the same survey to each participating supervisor. One survey form was for supervisors to assess their own managerial competencies and the remaining six were for supervisors to assess managerial competencies of six subordinates. We asked both supervisors and subordinates to return the completed survey forms directly to us. The respondents' anonymity was assured. After sending out the survey forms, in order to improve the response rate, we called respondents to solicit their collaboration. In the end, we received 240 valid responses from subordinates (response rate = approximately 80%) and 44 valid responses from supervisors (response rate = approximately 88%).

Table 1. Comparison Between Subordinates' Self-Evaluations and Their Evaluations of Supervisors In Relation to Managerial Competencies

	n	M	SD	t	Sig. (one-tailed)	Correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)
1. Understanding self and others							
subordinates	240	4.89	.42	2.33	$p < .05$	.33	.000*
supervisors	44	4.77	.69				
2. Communicating effectively							
subordinates	240	4.55	.50	5.61	$p < .051$	.09	*ns*
supervisors	44	4.01	.72				
3. Developing employees							
subordinates	240	4.99	.44	6.14	$p < .001$	.33	.000***
supervisors	44	4.72	.66				
4. Building teams							
subordinates	240	5.02	.49	6.83	$p < .001$	.38	.000***
supervisors	44	4.89	.73				
5. Using participative decision making							
subordinates	240	4.47	.49	7.01	$p < .001$	.27	.000***
supervisors	44	4.23	.61				
6. Managing conflict							
subordinates	240	4.02	.53	6.32	$p < .001$	.34	.000***
supervisors	44	3.78	.70				
7. Managing info/critical thinking							
subordinates	240	5.32	.55	2.88	$p < .01$	.40	.000***
supervisors	44	4.44	.60				
8. Managing information overload							
subordinates	240	5.55	.51	6.67	$p < .001$	.44	.000***
supervisors	44	5.01	.79				
9. Managing core processes							
subordinates	240	3.88	.56	5.99	$p < .001$	.39	.000***
supervisors	44	3.80	.77				

Table 1 continued

	n	M	SD	t	Sig. (one-tailed)	Correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)
1. Managing projects							
subordinates	240	5.20	.50				
supervisors	44	4.90	.76	5.89	$p < .001$	.27	.000***
11. Designing work							
subordinates	240	4.47	.47				
supervisors	44	4.00	.68	6.16	$p < .001$	.31	.000***
12. Managing across functions							
subordinates	240	3.83	.55				
supervisors	44	3.61	.70	2.55	$p < .01$	.38	.000**
13. Developing/communicating vision							
subordinates	240	5.55	.58				
supervisors	44	4.99	.64	7.09	$p < .001$	.23	.000***
14. Setting goals and objectives							
subordinates	240	3.88	.41				
supervisors	44	3.80	.62	6.68	$p < .001$	.37	.000***
15. Designing and organizing							
subordinates	240	3.70	.53				
supervisors	44	3.23	.60	2.62	$p < .001$	.30	.000**
16. Working productively							
subordinates	240	5.07	.55				
supervisors	44	4.66	.70	7.00	$p < .001$	.27	.000***
17. Fostering productive work environment							
subordinates	240	3.85	.49				
supervisors	44	3.39	.63	6.09	$p < .001$	.33	.000***
18. Managing time/stress							
subordinates	240	3.77	.55				
supervisors	44	3.75	.59	6.66	$p < .001$	.41	.000***

Table 1 continued

	n	M	SD	t	Sig. (one-tailed)	Correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)
19. Living with change							
subordinates	240	5.32	.55	6.51	$p < .001$	.22	.000***
supervisors	44	4.32	.76				
2. Thinking creatively							
subordinates	240	5.30	.49	5.98	$p < .001$	.24	.000***
supervisors	44	4.53	.63				
21. Managing change							
subordinates	240	4.66	.41	5.66	$p < .001$	.29	.000***
supervisors	44	4.11	.66				
22. Building/maintaining power base							
subordinates	240	4.89	.50	7.12	$p < .001$	.34	.000***
supervisors	44	4.44	.59				
23. Negotiating agreement/commitment							
subordinates	240	5.88	.66	5.90	$p < .001$	.21	.000***
supervisors	44	4.89	.79				
24. Presenting ideas							
subordinates	240	5.69	.55	6.46	$p < .001$	.36	.000***
supervisors	44	4.87	.72				

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. *Comparisons Between Supervisors' Self-Evaluations and Subordinates' Evaluations of Supervisors*

		n	M	SD	t	Sig. (one-tailed)	Correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)
1.	**Understanding self and others**							
	subordinates	240	3.77	.32	2.85	$p < .01$	.34	.000**
	supervisors	44	4.21	.72			.	
2.	**Communicating effectively**							
	subordinates	240	3.65	.39	6.02	$p < .001$	.32	.000***
	supervisors	44	4.13	.67				
3.	**Developing employees**							
	subordinates	240	3.99	.40	5.94	$p < .001$	.33	.000***
	supervisors	44	4.42	.69				
4.	**Building teams**							
	subordinates	240	3.92	.43	2.53	$p < .05$	.38	.000*
	supervisors	44	4.80	.74				
5.	**Using participative decision making**							
	subordinates	240	3.43	.52	6.66	$p < .05$	.10	ns
	supervisors	44	4.41	.66				
6.	**Managing conflict**							
	subordinates	240	3.12	.50	6.49	$p < .001$	.45	.000***
	supervisors	44	4.48	.71				
7.	**Managing info/critical thinking**							
	subordinates	240	3.62	.48	6.88	$p < .001$	.35	.000***
	supervisors	44	4.55	.63				
8.	**Managing information overload**							
	subordinates	240	4.25	.39	6.04	$p < .001$	.31	.000***
	supervisors	44	5.07	.72				
9.	**Managing core processes**							
	subordinates	240	3.88	.33	2.98	$p < .01$	.42	.000*
	supervisors	44	4.78	.52				

Table 2 continued

	n	M	SD	t	Sig. (one-tailed)	Correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)
1. Managing projects							
subordinates	240	5.20	.42				
supervisors	44	4.90	.51	6.68	$p < .001$	.22	.000***
11. Designing work							
subordinates	240	4.47	.47				
supervisors	44	4.00	.60	5.87	$p < .001$	.29	.000***
12. Managing across functions							
subordinates	240	3.83	.54				
supervisors	44	3.61	.71	7.24	$p < .001$	.22	.000***
13. Developing/Communicating vision							
subordinates	240	5.55	.37				
supervisors	44	4.99	.59	6.43	$p < .001$	.29	.000***
14. Setting goals and objectives							
subordinates	240	3.88	.55				
supervisors	44	3.80	.59	2.88	$p < .05$	.07	ns
15. Designing and organizing							
subordinates	240	3.10	.39				
supervisors	44	4.33	.64	2.99	$p < .01$	.47	.000***
16. Working productively							
subordinates	240	3.01	.49				
supervisors	44	4.81	.57	7.16	$p < .001$	.42	.000***
17. Fostering productive work environment							
subordinates	240	3.15	.38				
supervisors	44	4.43	.72	7.25	$p < .001$	.44	.000***
18. Managing time/stress							
subordinates	240	3.77	.44				
supervisors	44	5.25	.62	6.77	$p < .001$	-.46	.000***

Table 2 continued

	n	M	SD	t	Sig. (one-tailed)	Correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)
19. Living with change							
subordinates	240	4.12	.37	7.21	$p < .001$	.38	.000***
supervisors	44	4.76	.59				
2. Thinking creatively							
subordinates	240	4.00	.34	6.90	$p < .001$	.29	.000***
supervisors	44	4.47	.61				
21. Managing change							
subordinates	240	3.31	.46	6.34	$p < .001$	.40	.000***
supervisors	44	4.22	.58				
22. Building/Maintaining power base							
subordinates	240	2.28	.29	5.59	$p < .001$	-.47	.000***
supervisors	44	5.47	.52				
23. Negotiating agree/commitment							
subordinates	240	4.08	.32	6.18	$p < .001$	.41	.000***
supervisors	44	4.99	.51				
24. Presenting ideas							
subordinates	240	3.13	.45	7.21	$p < .001$	-.51	.000***
supervisors	44	4.98	.49				

Note. $^*\,p < .05$, $^{**}\,p < .01$, $^{***}\,p < .001$.

Results

Self- and Supervisors' Assessments of Subordinates' Managerial Competencies

In Table 1 we have juxtaposed subordinates' self-assessments and their supervisors' assessments of 24 managerial competencies. Results indicate that, except for communication skills ("communicating effectively"), the self- and supervisors' assessments are statistically different, based on the *t* tests. Additionally, the correlations between subordinates' mean self-evaluation scores and their supervisors' evaluation scores are weak, which also shows the discrepancies between these two types of evaluation. Overall, subordinates thought themselves more competent than did their supervisors.

Self- and Subordinates' Assessments of Supervisors' Managerial Competencies

In this study, we also investigated whether or not there were any differences between supervisors' assessments of their own managerial competencies and subordinates' assessments of supervisors' competencies. In Table 2 it can be seen that, except for Competency 5 ("using participative decision making") and Competency 14 ("setting goals and objectives") there were statistically significant differences between supervisors' self-evaluations and subordinates' evaluations of supervisors' managerial competencies, and that supervisors' self-evaluations were better than were their subordinates' evaluations of them across all 24 managerial competencies. Generally speaking, supervisors considered themselves as more open-minded, considerate, goal-oriented, and efficiency-directed than their subordinates perceived them to be. It is noteworthy too that in comparing Tables 1 and 2, we found that subordinates considered themselves more managerially competent than their supervisors, although in a bureaucratic system supposedly supervisors should have better managerial competencies than their subordinates because of meritocracy (Osborne, 1993).

Discussion

In this study we found significant differences between subordinates' self-evaluations and supervisors' evaluations of subordinates. Subordinates' self-evaluations were better than supervisors' evaluations of subordinates. These findings are similar to those gained in studies conducted elsewhere (see e.g., Stoker & Van der Heijden, 2001). Mabe and West (1982) undertook a meta-analysis of 55 studies on the validity of self-evaluations of ability and found that self-reported ability assessments and other types of ability/performance measurements including tests, grades, and supervisory evaluation had weak

correlations ranging between .23 and .31. Two reasons might explain our findings; first, the so-called leniency effect, in which it is argued that individuals are driven by self-enhancement, which leads to emphasizing their own merits and downplaying their faults (Huber & Power, 1985; Stoker & Van der Heijden, 2001). Therefore, when making a self-evaluation individuals tend to enhance their own performance. Secondly, management competencies are meta-cognitive knowledge, which is, perhaps the most difficult person-bound factor for which to perform a valid evaluation (Coffey, 2007). Measuring managerial competencies becomes more difficult the more remote supervisors are from their subordinates' tasks (Summers, 2000). In some studies on the interaction between supervisors and subordinates researchers have shown that, due to the high mobility of leaders, the lack of familiarity between supervisors and subordinates leads to the underevaluation of subordinates' managerial competencies (Boerlijst, Van der Heijden, & van Assen, 1993). Supervisory evaluation, therefore, may not truly reflect subordinates' real performance. This explanation is quite significant in the context of China where local public officials are experiencing rather heavy workloads in terms of policy implementation and public service delivery (Andornino & Wilcox, 2006). Street-level public officials enjoy considerably high respect from their supervisors (Zhou, 2007) and their supervisors are also reluctant to intervene in their daily administration (Read, 2000). Therefore, within China public officials do not interact with their supervisors as frequently as may be expected (Xu & Liu, 1995). Consequently, the extent to which supervisors really know their subordinates' competencies is potentially problematic.

In this study we also found that supervisors' self-evaluations were different from the evaluations of them by their subordinates, and supervisors' self-evaluations were better than their subordinates' evaluation of them. Several reasons may contribute to these findings. As earlier noted, the leniency effect may play a role. Second, because of China's authoritarian culture and hierarchical government structure, supervisors are more likely to attribute any organizational success to their own managerial competencies and blame their subordinates when things go wrong (Wang, 1981). Finally, Chinese supervisors have to prioritize tasks assigned by the local Communist Party Committee (Zhou, 2004). For them, "listening to the Party" is the most important competency (Zhou, 2007) and political rationale always trumps technical rationale; therefore, supervisors have very strong incentives to possess the competency of political loyalty over other managerial competencies. Thus, whereas supervisors overevaluate their overall competencies because they consider listening to the Party to be the most important, subordinates underevaluate their supervisors' competencies because subordinates do not consider the capability of listening to the Party to be a managerial competency at all.

Conclusion

Our results in this study revealed significant discrepancies between the self-evaluation of managerial competencies by supervisors and the evaluation of supervisors' managerial competencies by their subordinates, with the self-evaluations of both groups being more favorable than their evaluations of each other. These findings suggest that in China, neither self-evaluation nor position-based evaluation is reliable in assessing managerial competencies (Ding, 2008). No matter what is the level of a public official – whether they are supervisors or subordinates – they tend to overevaluate themselves and underevaluate their lower or higher level colleagues.

Because of the unreliability of self-evaluation and position-based evaluation, we suggest several strategies to improve the assessment of management competencies in Chinese government. First, a third-party evaluation method should be adopted. The independence and professionalism of third-party entities, to a large degree, will provide objective and comprehensive evaluations for both supervisors and their subordinates (Acquaah, 2007). Second, the supervisory evaluation process should be open and transparent, and communication between supervisors and subordinates should be regular and honest (Carson, 2006; Sanderson, 2001). By using CVF, supervisors and subordinates could frequently assess and compare their management competencies and develop measures and strategies to enhance these competencies. In this way, ideas and perceptions of the competencies can be converged and shared (Stoker & Van der Heijden, 2001). Third, public officials, whether supervisors or subordinates, need to be systematically trained in how to implement a consistent evaluation scheme. Fourth, the most difficult – but perhaps most effective – way to address evaluation discrepancies is to reform the current Chinese administrative system (Li & Zhou, 2005). In China there is no political and public administration dichotomy (Jing & Savas, 2009). Almost all public officials are ruling party members (Jiang, 1996). Political loyalty to the ruling party is considered the paramount management competency, which demotivates Chinese public officials from developing essential management competencies (Zhou, 2007). As long as these officials do not make mistakes and are loyal to the party, they will be rewarded and promoted regardless of their management competencies and the extent to which they can satisfy citizens' demands (Bian, Shu, & Logan, 2001; Brodsgaard & Zheng, 2006). However, in the current political milieu, there is still a separation between party politics and the civil service system (Tsao & Worthley, 2009) and liberating public personnel development and management from the Party's control has been suggested as the most fundamental and effective way to eliminate bureaucratic impasses (Edin, 2003).

We believe that our findings will enrich the understanding of Chinese public officials' managerial competencies and indicate how to assess their skills effectively. Additionally, our findings may assist Chinese public officials in improving managerial competency training and management.

Endnotes

To control the size of government, upper level public personnel management in China strictly controls the number of public officials that lower level government can employ. According to the official staff directory we have, each public official in a leadership position in Jiangsu province has six subordinates at most and most public officials who took part in our survey had a maximum of six subordinates. Some supervisors we surveyed had fewer than six subordinates. Therefore, we received 244 valid responses from subordinates instead of 264.

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