

COMPETENCES OF THE LEADER OF AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION IN THE OPINION OF STUDENTS OF SILESIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Purpose: The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of the school director in terms of the competencies necessary for a leader of an educational institution.

Design/methodology/approach: The goal was achieved through literature analysis and analysis of a survey questionnaire.

Findings: Based on the analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey, it can be concluded that, according to the respondents, the leader of an educational institution is, first of all, a person who takes action based on shared values that are accepted and shared by the school community. This is the opinion of 31% of respondents. Among the soft leadership competencies, respondents considered communicativeness to be the most important. Among the activities that enhance the image of the director of an educational institution, respondents mainly included the development of the school's culture and programs that enhance the development of students and teachers (74% of indications) and the provision of appropriate school management, including the resources necessary for a responsible learning environment (73% of indications). On the other hand, respondents cited team management as one of the key challenges for the director as a leader of an educational institution (42% of indications).

Research limitations/implications: The research conducted was a pilot study with more than 200 respondents, management students from Silesian universities. Future surveys are planned on a much larger scale.

Practical implications: According to respondents, the school director's key challenges do not include "the need for self-awareness." Relatively the fewest indications from respondents concerned the school director's challenges related to self-awareness - adequate self-image (4%), self-development (6%), or control of one's own emotionality (11%). Also, the competency "developing self-awareness" was considered important by only 12% of respondents. Which confirms that this is an area that requires constant awareness of the importance of self-improvement and awareness of one's own competencies and strengths and weaknesses. Lifelong education and learning is one of the most important tasks facing the countries under the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (Kuzior et al., 2023) and one of the main elements of the European social model of successful human existence (Lukianova, 2023), so this competence is all the more important for those responsible for educating others.

Social implications: The research helps to change the public's stereotypical perception of a school director, identifying him or her as a leader with a range of diverse competencies and pursuing ambitious challenges.

Originality/value: An innovative approach to the director's function and attention to the need to develop leadership competencies so that he can effectively achieve his goals and mission.

Keywords: competences, leader, educational institution, educational leadership, management.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

Introduction

The development of the information society requires schools to permanently evolve, as well as to develop intellectual and pro-social skills among students intellectual, and the ability to perceive the world correctly. Ethical education, which plays an important role in shaping the world of values of young people, can become helpful in this process (Kuzior et al., 2019). It also becomes a challenge to develop in them the need for lifelong, continuous education. The realization of these goals is only possible by taking appropriate measures both inside the educational institution and externally (through cooperation with the local environment). Awareness of these trends is a prerequisite for effective leadership, and the responsibility for their implementation lies with the school director.

Currently, there are both socio-economic changes (Drucker, 2000) and changes in the education system. Schools and educational institutions are forced to adapt to the changing environment. Equally important is becoming an innovative approach to exercising the function of the director of these units (Kupis, 2018). As M. Rosalska notes, "a school director is not only a person who manages resources and processes" (Rosalska, 2016, p. 206) but who takes care of the school's images (Cieśla, 2022).

In general, the term "director" is defined in the Act of January 26, 1982. - Teachers' Charter. article 7 (1) and (2). From this provision it follows that the tasks of the school director consist primarily of: managing the institution, coordinating the work of those employed therein, and supervising pedagogical activities. Directors are required to be leaders who set new directions for the development of the educational institution. Their main tasks include: management of pedagogical problems, care of students and alumni, pedagogical supervision of teachers and tutors, chairing the pedagogical council, acting as a workplace manager, as well as taking care of the place of learning and work in terms of material and technical aspects, which in practice means issuing administrative decisions related to the school year in force, and hiring and firing school employees (Leśniak, 2011). In addition, directors of educational institutions face ambitious, multifaceted challenges, which include, among others, effective human resource management related to both attracting and retaining top talent (Ober, 2016), operating in

a multicultural environment, or creating an organizational culture that is tailored to current conditions, while continuously investing in their own development.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the role of the school director in terms of the competencies necessary for a leader of an educational institution. The literature review (which presents the concept of a leader, the competencies necessary to perform this function effectively, or educational leadership) was complemented by a pilot empirical study. They were conducted from April to June of this year among 200 management students of Silesian universities, verifying the respondents' views on the issue at hand.

1. Leader vs. manager

A leader can be defined as an individualist who is aware of his own differences (Urban, 2007). According to T. Krawczyńska-Zaucha, being a leader means inspiring others to achieve a goal (Krawczyńska-Zaucha, 2020). The basis of its success is to build its own credibility and of great importance in this process is the atmosphere in the team and the level of mutual trust (Szafran, 2013). Leaders who lead by example, who are consistent in words and deeds, take care of the fundamental factor of building credibility of their leadership (Williams, 2009).

In global companies, the concept of leadership is often contrasted with the concept of directing (like the person of a leader and manager). There, management is defined as "doing something through others" (Tokar, 2015, p. 32), and leadership (leading) as "getting others to want to do something" (Tokar, 2015, p. 32).

P.F. Drucker repeatedly stressed that a leader, in order to carry out his tasks, must have followers (Hesselbein, 1997). Preferably people who will constitute his team. Only then will the implementation of tasks be possible and make sense. For someone to be called a leader there must be people behind him (Maxwell, 2007).

In attempting to define the relationship between a leader (leader) and a manager (manager), one should refer to the theory of management issues. For example, L. Krzyżanowski considers leadership to be "the information-decision-making influence of the management apparatus, transmitted through information channels shaped by organizational rules to the organizational cells of the real sphere. These interactions cause the material-power interactions emitted by these cells to aim at achieving the goals of the organization" (Peszko, 2002, p. 46). In turn, J. Kurnal referring to the definition of a manager (manager) indicates that in order to perform certain tasks, he performs a number of functions (Kurnal, 2001). He plans the use of resources, creates an activity structure and sets tasks, motivates his subordinates to carry out specific tasks, and monitors the status of their performance. A manager, when undertaking the management of people, acts in a way that corresponds to one or more concepts of human resource management. These are based on various theories and premises including technological,

philosophical, bureaucratic, human relations, motivational, integrative or rational behavioral, among others. The result of a manager's actions should always be the task accomplished, the satisfaction of subordinates' needs, including their professional development, and the strengthening of an organizational culture conducive to the efficient performance of tasks (Bartkowiak, Niewiadomski, 2011). Meanwhile, a manager can be seen as a leader when he bases his influence on his subordinates not only on the service hierarchy, but also on the authority he has built (which, among other things, he builds through his leadership). This is evidence that leadership is seen as a certain ability, skill or trait of rallying followers, exerting influence, as well as creating a vision, inspiring and spurring people to action (Tokar, 2015). Moreover, it is a collective effort to achieve the goal (By, 2021). It is also worth mentioning that leadership is an integral part of entrepreneurship (Audretsch, Tamvada, 2023).

Sometimes in practice the terms leader (leader) and manager (manager) are used interchangeably. According to the authors, wrongly, since these two roles are not only different, but sometimes contradict each other. Only exceptional personalities are able to combine them (Kupis, 2018).

The diverse challenges facing executives today require a range of different competencies. These must include both hard competencies related to the specifics of the industry as well as social competencies and psychological skills (Tokar, Oleksa-Marewska, 2021). A manager's influence on employees determines his leadership, since formal authority gives managers power, and leadership determines the extent to which they use it. P.F. Drucker stresses that the only proper definition of a leader is the one that says he is a person with followers. According to him, an effective leader achieves positive results from his actions, is an example for others and is a responsible person. The domain of effective leaders is the ability to anticipate threats and opportunities facing the team (Tokar, 2015).

The effective functioning of a school requires proper management, and preferably proper direction by a leader who will create a strategy, create and implement changes, build interpersonal relationships, help the group with interaction, motivate further development, as well as generate change. Thus, it can be noted that the role of a leader is not the same as the tasks of a person who "only" manages. The task of managers is to manage human resources, value the results of work (diagnostic, formative, summative), organize and control the solution of problems. Thus, it becomes a desirable situation for a manager to acquire the ability to perform the tasks of both a leader and a manager, and thus combine these two roles (Moos, 2010). A manager-leader is a director who manages not so much by the power of his position, but by his ability to convince employees and arouse their enthusiasm to build the school's potential.

2. Competences of the school director

The modern director is a manager, a negotiator and a creative advisor. It is no longer just a person to properly maintain the records and reporting of the school (Kupis, 2018). Today, building a school's capacity requires leaders who are not only able to look holistically at each component of a school, but those who seek to bring all of these elements together to strengthen potential. This confronts school directors in a situation where they should manifest both excellent knowledge of the interrelationships operating between the various areas, and possess excellent skills in working to bring the various elements together for the development of the school (Hadfield, 2006).

The primary tasks of school principals include improving the quality of school work, developing teachers, including motivating them to improve their competence and qualifications, enabling the full development of all school employees. Assuming the function of a school director is associated with an in-depth knowledge of the processes involved and an awareness of the need to take on new roles, tasks as well as to act under time pressure and stress. These tasks require having broad competencies in both personal, social, professional, business and managerial areas. In recent years, changes have been introduced in the education system and educational realities are clearly raising the profile of school principals, increasing their responsibilities. They are faced with challenges such as building an individual path of school development, or organizing pedagogical supervision to efficiently control the achievement of set standards (Kupis, 2018).

Constant review and continuous improvement of the director's work, willingness to cooperate on many levels, and attentive listening and consistency in action are his daily activities. Undertaking these activities has become a prerequisite for the effectiveness of performing the function of a school director. According to J.M. Michalak, the strength of the school principal as a leader comes from his righteous character and the application of certain principles (Michalak, 2006). These elements have a significant impact on the quality of the school's work and its operation.

The director of an educational institution is not only an expert in education. Nowadays, due to a significant transformation in the labor market (Kochmańska, 2012), he is also required to have leadership competencies. J. Madalińska-Michalak emphasizes, "that high competences of educational managers - is one of the conditions for effective school management, both in terms of carrying out the school principal's own tasks and supporting the development and learning of teachers" (Madalińska-Michalak, 2016, p. 10).

A. Ludwicyński i H. Król define competencies as "predispositions in knowledge, skills, and attitudes that ensure the performance of professional tasks at an effective and/or outstanding level according to the standards set by the organization for the job" (Król, Ludwicyński, p. 82).

Among the leadership competencies that a director of an educational institution should possess can be the development of self-awareness, defined as subjective and accurate knowledge of one's own inner self, for example, mental state, emotions, sensations, beliefs, desires and personality (Showry, Manasa, 2014). Self-awareness at work, on the other hand, is an accurate assessment of one's own behavior and skills in the workplace (Showry, Manasa, 2014). Another competence is managing stress through, for example, the use of varied behavioral techniques (Schwartz, 1980). Creative problem solving (seen as the creation of high-quality, original solutions in response to complex, novel and ill-defined problems) (Bresemer, Quin, 1999), influencing while motivating employees (using tools to increase employee engagement) (Brown et al., 2011) or delegation (which occurs when a manager delegates authority and responsibility for making and implementing decisions to subordinates) (Yukl, Fu, 1999) are also extremely important. J. Ober, on the other hand, draws attention to communication (both internal, which is aimed at changing the beliefs of the audience) and external (which defines the main goals of the company) (Ober, 2022). When analyzing the leadership competencies of the director of an educational institution, one should also not forget about conflict management (the principle that not all conflicts cannot be resolved, but knowing how to manage conflicts can reduce the likelihood of unproductive escalation) (Bakhare, 2010). It is also important to make decisions as a team, taking into account in this process the evaluation of various forms of information (Halvorsen, 2010) and their ethicality (Kuzior, 2021) or building the right interpersonal relationships (which are usually associated with a certain level of interdependence) (Velmurugan, 2016). Building relationship is also mentioned by E. Wiśniewska. The author believes that they should be based on sincerity, openness and trust. This allows, according to the author, to create not only one's own mastery, but also self-confidence and trust in one's competence (Wiśniewska, 2016).

3. Modern educational leadership

The continuous processes taking place in the field of education, as well as achieving optimal results in school work, require educational leadership (Alzoraiki et al., 2023). As J. Kołodziejczyk points out, "a key role for the formation of the identity of educational leadership and management is played by the identification of the dominant discourse taking over the current way of thinking about education and leading it (Kołodziejczyk, 2019, p. 14). There are many definitions of educational leadership in the literature, both in a specific and more general context (Kwiatkowski, Michalak, 2010). Its meaning is often difficult to describe, due in part to the difficulty of defining the concept of leadership itself (Leżucha, 2019). The concept of leadership refers to various fields and disciplines of science, but also applies to the business sphere. According to G. Cęcelek, "educational leadership occurs in the area of the

sphere of education, so it is a process that relates to the related activities of the teacher and students: teaching and learning, and to a large extent is similar to them in that it involves striving to unleash in others the ability to perform to the best of their abilities, and at the same time with a sense of respect for others and respect for their dignity" (Cęcelek, 2020, p. 130).

The right approach to leadership requires the appropriate adaptation of its specific elements to other fields and the deepening of the essence of the concept (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2015). The standards for running an educational institution in accordance with educational leadership do not narrow the role of the principal as a leader, but only guide him. They apply to activities carried out inside as well as outside the school, and their implementation can be divided into three areas: the local environment, at the intersection of the local environment and the self-leader, and the self-leader (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2015). Area one is mainly about diagnosing the local environment, defining the needs of the school community, creating a vision for change in education and the institution itself, inspiring, motivating and involving all those around the institution as well as educating and informing the local environment. Area two is mainly about building relationships and cooperation between the local environment and the leader. It concerns relations inside the school with students, parents/guardians, teachers and other staff, relations outside with the closer environment (for example. local media, local government, private entities) and relations with the further environment (for example, ORE, MEN). The last area, or self-leadership, involves awareness of one's own values, goals, the role of the leader as an educational leader, and functioning in a changing environment. It is also a sense of responsibility for the changes implemented in the school, as well as a sense of self-development and lifelong learning (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2015).

Referring to the definition of the term management leader cited in the first section of the article, it can be considered that a school leader has many characteristics identical to the cited definition. First, educational leadership occurs when the principal-leader is able to stimulate the school community to realize common goals, take actions based on shared values, based on dialogue, participation and serving the common good. The director-leader recognizes and implements common goals, plans, objectives, and sees potential in people, institutions and the entire school environment. Therefore, it can be considered that educational leadership is also a process of influencing the entire school community, for the achievement of the set common goals. Modern educational leadership, therefore, requires the director-leader to possess certain personality traits, competencies as well as an orientation toward change. Taking into consideration the unstable economic, political, technological (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2015) legal and social (Jeżowski, 2015) environment, the director must be aware of the threats as well as the opportunities coming from the environment.

4. Analysis of research results

The survey was conducted from April to June 2023. More than 200 students participated in the survey. 200 questionnaires were analyzed and all questions were answered. All respondents studied at Silesian universities (both private and public, randomly selected) whose main focus is the development of managerial competence.

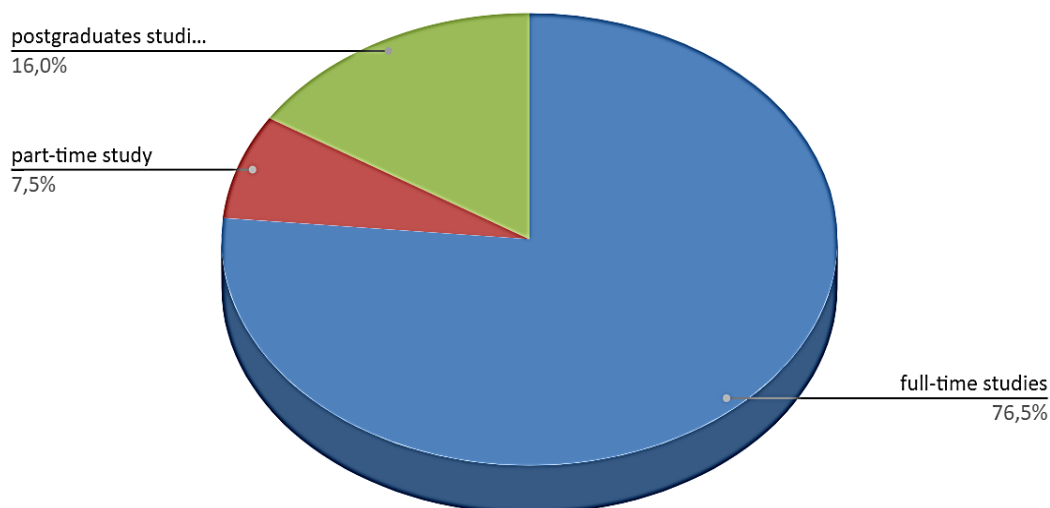


Figure 1. Student participation in the survey.

Both full-time (76.5%), postgraduate (16%) and part-time (7.5%) students participated in the survey. It is also worth mentioning that 71% of the respondents were women and 29% were men. The vast majority were between 19 and 25 years of age (76% of respondents). 18% of respondents were over the age of 33.

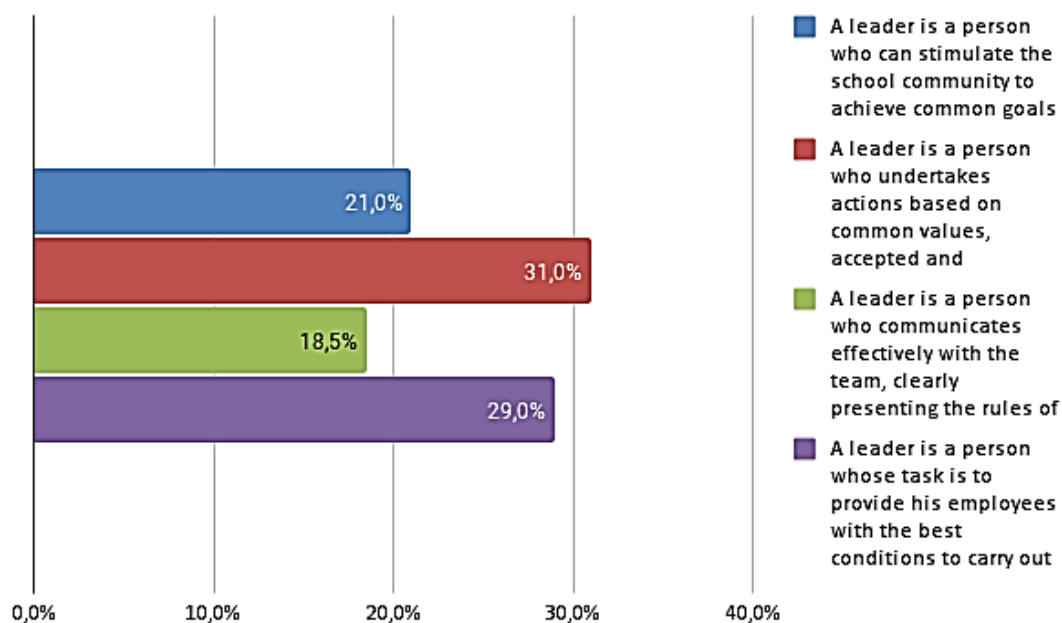


Figure 2. Definition of an educational institution leader according to respondents.

According to respondents, the leader of an educational institution is a person who takes action based on shared values that are accepted and shared by the school community. This is the opinion of 31% of respondents. However, it should be noted that the opinions of respondents are relatively even. Interestingly, the definition of a leader of an educational institution cited in an earlier section of the paper is also quite expansive and emphasizes three of the four elements described in this question. This demonstrates the need to sustain an expanded definition of educational leadership that includes the elements described so far, and possibly deepen the research to look for new elements. To the definition proposed by the experts, the study added a fourth element to the definition: "a leader is a person whose task is to provide his or her employees with the best possible conditions for carrying out their assigned tasks, so that they can perform their work as effectively as possible". As the results show, 29% of respondents chose this very element as the most important factor in the definition of a leader of an educational institution. This proves the need to constantly update and expand the definition of an educational institution leader.

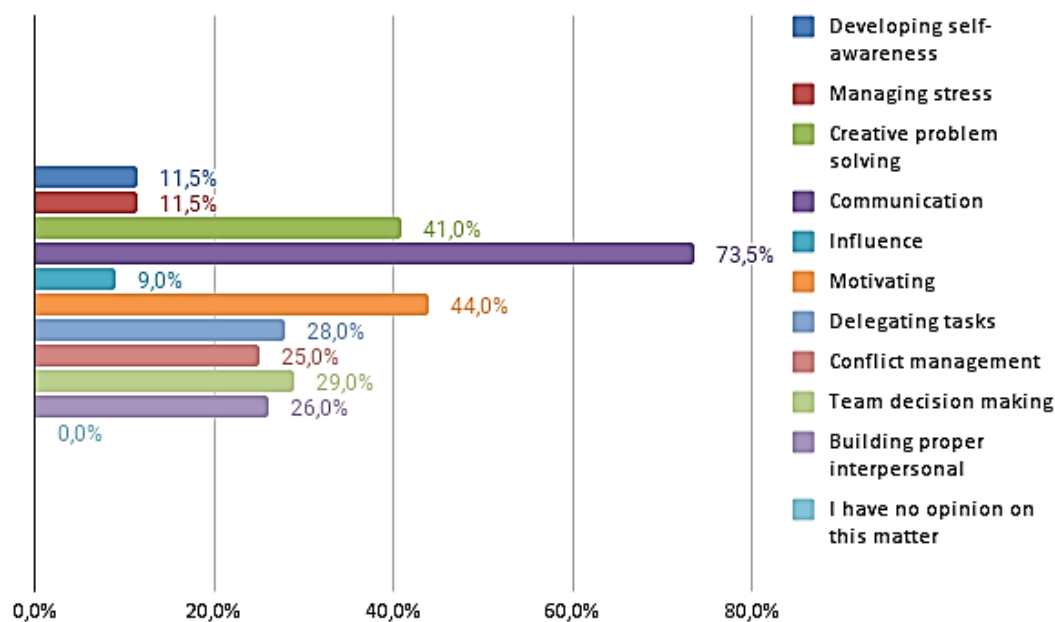


Figure 3. The most important soft leadership competencies of the director of an educational institution in the opinion of respondents.

Among the soft leadership competencies, respondents considered communicativeness to be the most important. Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents indicated this particular competence as the most important. The question was a multiple-choice question, but clearly in the opinion of respondents this is a key competence for the director of an educational institution. Importantly, many researchers of management issues consider this very competence as the base competence for the development of all soft competencies. Two other competencies highlighted by respondents were motivating and creative problem solving. None of the respondents took the option of not indicating any competency.

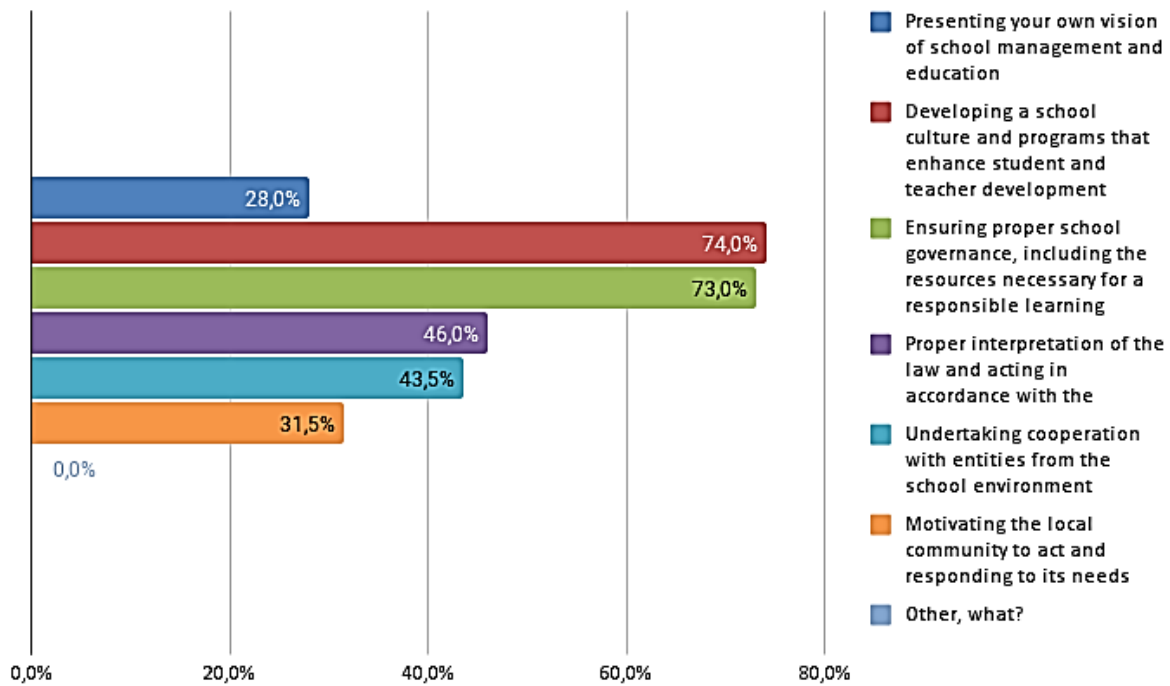


Figure 4. Activities of the director most effective in enhancing his image as a leader of an educational institution.

Among the activities that enhance the image of the educational institution's director, respondents mainly included developing the school's culture and programs that enhance the development of students and teachers (74% of indications) and providing adequate school management, including the resources necessary for a responsible learning environment (73% of indications). Interestingly, the least, with only 28% of indications, was to provide their own vision of school leadership and education. The missed potential of this situation can be seen here. It is a common view in management science that situations in which leaders present their vision are an opportunity to build team motivation and commitment. They also contribute to a better understanding of the values and principles on which the company's goals will be realized.

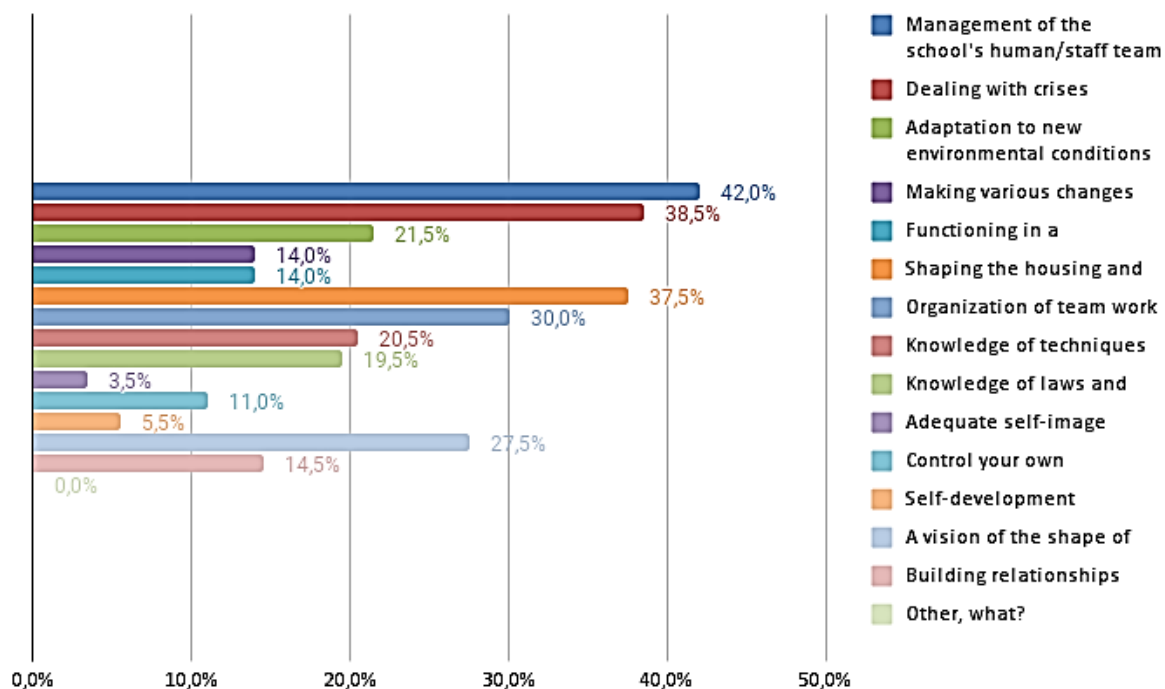


Figure 5. The key challenges of the school director in the opinion of the respondents.

Among the key challenges for the director as a leader of an educational institution, respondents included team management (42% of indications), while in second and third place in virtually the same position, respondents indicated dealing with crises (38.5% of indications) and shaping the premises and spatial conditions, including the provision of appropriate equipment and facilities adequate to the needs of learners (37.5% of indications). None of the respondents added their suggestion. Relatively fewest indications were related to challenges of self-awareness - adequate self-image (3.5%), self-development (5.5%) and also control of one's own emotionality (11%). This is an area in need of improvement and constant awareness of the importance of self-improvement and awareness of one's own competence.

Summary

Asking management students at Silesian universities who they believe is the leader of an educational institution was intended to help identify the key competencies and challenges facing this professional group. In many of the responses, a picture of the leader emerges that is consistent with the analysis of the literature. Respondents indicated how they understand the concept of "leader of an educational institution," what competencies it is characterized by, and what they believe are the main challenges that principals aspiring to be leaders face on a daily basis. The analysis of the literature and the responses of the respondents leads to the reflection that the director is perceived as. "manager of tomorrow" (Kaczmarek, 2013, p. 177)

who strives to make the school a safe, efficiently managed place that meets the needs of students, parents and all employees. Therefore, the director as a leader should develop continuously, acquire the necessary knowledge and acquire new skills through which he has a chance to gain respect and social prestige. Here it should be emphasized how undervalued by the group of respondents turned out to be the competence related to self-awareness. Working on oneself, preferably on the path of self-improvement, holistic development, affecting the whole personality is an opportunity to develop the leadership competence of modern directors. J.C. Maxwell repeatedly stressed that leadership cannot be discovered in oneself, it must be developed. The innate aptitude must be constantly improved (Maxwell, 2007). On the one hand, the director is expected to combine the qualities of a leader, a good colleague, a friend, but also a constructive critic whose feedback will motivate further development activities. This is a difficult challenge requiring, awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses and working on oneself.

Considering that "the tasks of directors of educational institutions are multidimensional. Most generally, they include pedagogical activities, as well as legal-administrative, decision-making and image-making activities" (Marek, 2016, p. 29) directors, as leaders who care about the development of the school's potential, should be expected to take care, among other things, of proper cooperation with the local government, as they should care about the best possible funding of the institution. Then their work and commitment will allow the school to develop, raising the level of education of both students and teachers. The school's leader must take care of the school's positive image in both the local and national and often global environment. The right reputation boosts the morale of staff and students, who take pride in working and learning at this particular institution. A good perception and high rating of the school also allows the director to have opportunities to take part in interesting ventures and projects, winning the favor of the local authorities and, above all, parents. As practice shows, this will be difficult to achieve if the director lacks leadership competencies or awareness of their improvement. The pace of today's changes, the scope and nature of the duties of directors of educational institutions make us reflect that it is difficult to define one specific set of competencies that would enable the implementation of tasks. Therefore, it is so important to be open to change, to have courage and to be willing to continuously develop.

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