

A multidimensional model of management competence in social services: validation of the Social Services Management Scale

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Executive Summary

This study addresses the absence of validated, context-sensitive instruments for measuring managerial competencies in social service organizations. The authors argue that existing managerial assessment tools are predominantly derived from business or generic public administration contexts and fail to capture the ethical, relational, and interdisciplinary dimensions specific to social services. To address this gap, the study developed and validated the Social Services Management Scale (SSMS) through a two-phase design: an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) conducted on a Slovak sample ($n = 148$) followed by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on an independent sample ($n = 306$). The empirical analysis yielded a three-factor structure — Leadership and Strategic Management, Planning and Organizing, and Communication and Interpersonal Skills — which diverged from the theoretically anticipated four-factor model based on classical Fayolian functions. The final model demonstrated excellent fit indices ($CFI = 0.990$, $RMSEA = 0.049$), high internal consistency (α and $\omega > 0.90$ across all factors), and adequate convergent validity ($AVE > 0.50$). Criterion validity was partially supported, with managerial position correlating significantly with leadership, planning, and overall SSMS scores, but not with communication competencies. The authors conclude that the SSMS provides an empirically grounded, sector-specific instrument with implications for evidence-based management development, recruitment, and policy in welfare organizations.

Key Insights

1. The empirically derived three-factor structure (Leadership and Strategic Management, Planning and Organizing, Communication and Interpersonal Skills) did not replicate the theoretically anticipated four-factor Fayolian model, suggesting that managerial competencies in social services are configured differently than in business or industrial contexts.
2. Communication and Interpersonal Skills showed no statistically significant correlation with managerial position ($r = 0.044$, $p > 0.05$), indicating these competencies may be equally distributed across hierarchical levels in social service organizations rather than being concentrated in senior roles.
3. The study identifies a distinct integration of ethical orientation and strategic competence within a single factor, challenging the assumption that administrative and moral dimensions of management are separable constructs in social service settings.

Practical Takeaways

- The SSMS offers a three-dimensional assessment instrument that organizations in social services can use to profile managerial competencies across leadership/strategy, planning/organizing, and communication/interpersonal domains, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts.
- The non-significant correlation between managerial position and communication skills suggests that interpersonal competency development may be relevant across all staff levels, not only for those in formal management roles.

Frameworks Mentioned

Ethical Leadership — A leadership theory emphasizing integrity, fairness, and value-based decision-making in organizational contexts, cited as a theoretical basis for the ethical dimension of the SSMS.

Servant Leadership — A leadership model highlighting empathy, employee support, and commitment to the wellbeing and development of others, referenced as a conceptual foundation for the relational dimensions of social service management.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study follows established scale development protocols, employing sequential EFA and CFA on independent samples, using appropriate estimators for ordinal data (WLSMV), and reporting multiple fit indices, reliability coefficients, and validity indicators. The final model demonstrates strong psychometric properties and the instrument is grounded in both classical management theory and sector-specific literature. **Limitations:** The exclusively Slovak sample substantially restricts generalizability, as social service governance structures, regulatory environments, and professional cultures vary considerably across countries. The self-report design introduces social desirability and self-enhancement biases, with no external or multi-source validation. The controlled item removal process (particularly FA1_20 and FA3_1) was post-hoc and partly data-driven, which warrants caution regarding overfitting. Two items (FA1_13 and FA3_8) exhibited exceptionally high standardized loadings (0.926 and 0.967), raising questions about item redundancy and construct boundary clarity. The study also acknowledges that formal ethical approval was not obtained, citing institutional exemption for anonymous questionnaire research, which may be viewed as a procedural gap by some research communities. The use of ChatGPT v.5.0 for language polishing is disclosed but warrants transparency regarding any influence on interpretive framing.

Organizational Practice

The study describes Slovak social service organizations recruiting participants from non-governmental, governmental, private, and church-affiliated providers. Managers in these settings are observed to perform functions including regulatory compliance monitoring, interdisciplinary coordination, staff support, client-centered care, task delegation, and strategic planning under conditions of budgetary constraint and high staff turnover. Managerial positions were categorized into three levels: no managing function, team manager, and manager, with the majority of respondents (approximately 79–81%) holding no formal managerial role.

Strategic Implications

The finding that classical four-function managerial models do not map directly onto social service contexts suggests that PMS frameworks imported from corporate settings may produce incomplete or misaligned

competency profiles when applied in welfare organizations. The empirical clustering of ethical decision-making with strategic orientation within a single factor points toward a pattern where moral and administrative responsibilities are perceived as inseparable in human service management, which has implications for how competency frameworks are structured in this sector. The absence of a significant relationship between hierarchical position and communication skills indicates that relational competency development is not exclusively a senior leadership concern in these organizations. The instrument's development within a post-socialist Central and Eastern European context positions it as a potential basis for comparative research across welfare systems undergoing institutional transformation.

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