

Skills of an Effective Administrator

By
Robert Katz

Harvard Business Review first published Robert Katz's "Skills of an Effective Administrator" in 1955. It is still as applicable today as it was when first published – which is why it is an HBR classic. Katz's basic premise is that an administrator (manager) must possess three different skill sets:

Technical Skills – These skills are related to an individual's specific area of expertise. They are the ability of an accountant to understand cash flow statements, income statements and balance sheets. They are the ability of a graphics designer to understand the importance of colors and how to run the latest software. These are the basic "languages of the task" if you will.

Human Skills – These skills are related to an individual's ability to effectively interact with others. These are the skills that make some individuals great team members and others terrible. They are the skills that allow some people to succeed as managers and others to fail. They allow individuals to multiply their abilities by interacting with others.

Conceptual Skills – These skills are related to an individual's ability to think beyond the task at hand. These skills are the ability to picture how a new product will impact a company's position in the market. They are the ability to envision how things will look five years in the future AND to take this vision of the future and translate it in to a series of discrete steps that need to be accomplished to reach this new state. These are the skills to envision the future.

These three dimensions provide a rubric against which to evaluate a manager. What is most interesting is that in practice almost all managers' FAILURES can be mapped back to a shortcoming in one of these areas. While this is not a "law of nature" it is something that personal experience has shown me to be true in the vast majority of cases. There are three key actions based on this:

- Understand an individual's relative strengths in the technical, human and conceptual dimensions. Doing so will enable you to estimate *a priori* the tasks that he/she is likely to accomplish successfully.
- Understand your personal strengths in the technical, human and conceptual dimensions. Doing so will enable you to estimate *a priori* the tasks that you are likely to accomplish successfully.
- Understand your staff's strengths in the technical, human and conceptual dimensions. Doing so will enable you to work with them to develop as individuals.

Applying these three actions is a quick, easy, and effective way to put Katz's principles in to action. Further, doing so will increase your abilities in the technical, human and conceptual dimensions as they pertain to the role of a successful manager.

While all three skills are critical to success, they are normally learned and applied sequentially. The technical skills are those that are first obtained, followed by the human, and finally the conceptual. Think of a “new hire” to a company. First he/she learns the task at hand (technical), then they learn about their relationship to others in the organization (human), and finally they progress to understanding how their role effects the broader organization (conceptual). Three interesting observations about this traditional sequencing:

- While very common and widely used, it may not be the most effective. Rather, REVERSING the sequence may actually prove to be more effective: teach an individual how they fit in to the broader picture of the company, introduce them to those they will be working with, and then introduce them to the task they will be performing daily.
- As individuals progress in their career, the required skills shift. At the entry level technical skills are normally more important than conceptual. Conversely, at the senior level, conceptual skills normally dominate technical skills in importance.
- The human skills are “in the middle” at all times. I would argue that these are the most critical skills as interacting with others is necessary regardless of your position in the organization and allows you to leverage the skills of others to accomplish more than you could individually.

Others have observed, directly or indirectly, this relationship between the skills. In [The e-Myth Revisited](#) by Michael Gerber is widely regarded as one of the best books focused on the area of entrepreneurship. In the book Gerber talks about the progression of a business owner from technician, to manager, to entrepreneur. This maps extremely nicely to the development of technical, human and conceptual skills.

Taking the time to reflect on and use Katz’s schema for the evaluation of a manager is time well spent. It will help you become more effective both as a manager and as an individual contributor.

A link to the article may be found [here](#)