

SUPERVISORY SKILLS OF EXTENSION MANAGERS IN SEKHUKHUNE DISTRICT OF LIMPOPO PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of unsatisfactory extension delivery, this paper investigates the role of extension management, or, more specifically the skills of extension managers. The study was focused on one of six districts in Limpopo Province and the 107 respondents included 50 to 100 percent samples of the managers at the different levels, as well as 36 (33.6 percent) frontline extension workers as subordinates.

The findings in general confirm that the level of management skills is a cause for concern. Although not based on objective measures, it is the perceived assessments of subordinates - the main recipients of the management - that give credence to this conclusion. The fact that managers tend to overrate their management skills by approximately ten percent means that they underrate the management problem and are thus less likely to address it. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that this misperception regarding the management skills is worst in the most critical management categories, namely at the supervisory level (Sub-District Extension Coordinators) and the top extension management level (Extension Heads). These are the two management levels that can potentially have the biggest influence on the efficiency of extension delivery.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of tremendous development challenges in the Limpopo province where large-scale poverty and unemployment prevails, extension is faced with an enormous task. With indications, however, that extension delivery is not very effective or efficient (Düvel, 2002), a big responsibility falls on the shoulders of extension managers, especially since management is a key issue and has a tremendous potential impact or multiplication effect on the total output or performance of extension. Good management, therefore, holds the prospect of significantly improving extension delivery. Without it, and even with dedicated and efficient field personnel, this is unlikely.

This raises the question as to whether and to what degree managers are able to meet their management responsibilities. Many concerns, amongst others by impartial specialists like Bembridge (1996) and Norman, D.W., Mollel, N.M., Mangheni, M.N.K. & Paradza, P.C. (1994), have been expressed in this regard, but in the absence of empirical evidence these judgements have to be regarded as largely speculative. However, more recent studies by Düvel (2001, 2002) seem to confirm that there is justification for concern and that there are serious problems in the management of extension in the public extension service.

2. IN SEARCH OF A THEORETICAL BASIS

Basic to an understanding of good management is a sound theory. However, management theory tends to be viewed with some suspicion by many academics, because the theoretical basis is often obscure, in some cases perhaps quite non-existent (Baumann, 1997). However, there has been a clear evolution of the thought and the concept of management over the years.

Three perspectives contributed to what is called classical management: scientific management, administrative management and bureaucratic theory. These theories have in common a high concern for productivity, a rational view of human nature and a search for universals. The human relations movement, associated with the period after the 1930's, emphasised the need to focus on people. The key assumption of the movement was that workers were, for the most part, motivated and controlled by the social relationships experienced on their jobs. In the meantime the human emphasis of that movement has merged with the

classical emphasis on productivity to produce a more effective approach to management (DuBrin, Ireland & Williams (1989).

Today most of the research in management takes a contingency approach in defence of the fact that what works in one situation may not work in another. In view of these developments an appropriate way to investigate and evaluate the management of extension is to focus on the various management functions and skills, which can make provision for the technical as well as human focus. This has been the approach to this study.

3. METHOD

The choice of Sekhukhune District as study area was based on the first author's employment in that district and the consequent interest in and ease of access to the different managers and their subordinates. Further considerations were the tremendous challenges facing extension in that district, which include large scale poverty, degradation of resources and still largely untapped agricultural potential.

In evaluating the extension management the target survey population was the extension workers employed in the Department of Agriculture in the Sekhukhune district in the Limpopo Province, which included 107 frontline extension workers, 31 service centre heads, 10 sub-district extension coordinators, 6 extension coordinators, 4 sub-district heads and 2 extension heads. The ultimate sample sizes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The sample size of frontline extension workers and different managers involved in the survey

Respondent Category	Total	Number sampled	Percentage sampled
Extension Head	2	2	100
Sub-District Head	4	4	100
District Extension Coordinator	6	6	100
Sub-District Ext. Coordinator	10	7	70
Service Centre Head	31	16	51.6
Frontline Extension Workers	107	36	33.6

A pre-validated and pre-tested, semi-structured interview schedule was used and the interviews were largely conducted in group sessions. During the group interviews interaction was allowed and encouraged in so far as it contributed towards clarity of the questions, but care was taken that respondents ultimately provided their own views and opinions.

In the absence of objective evaluation data regarding managers, this study relies on the perceptions and judgements of subordinates, peers and senior managers. The various skills were assessed individually and later clustered into more general characteristics and skills.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 General management skills

The overall picture regarding the skills and attributes of managers in Sekhukhune is summarised in Figure 1, which reflects the broader categories of skills as assessed by the managers themselves as well as by their subordinates.

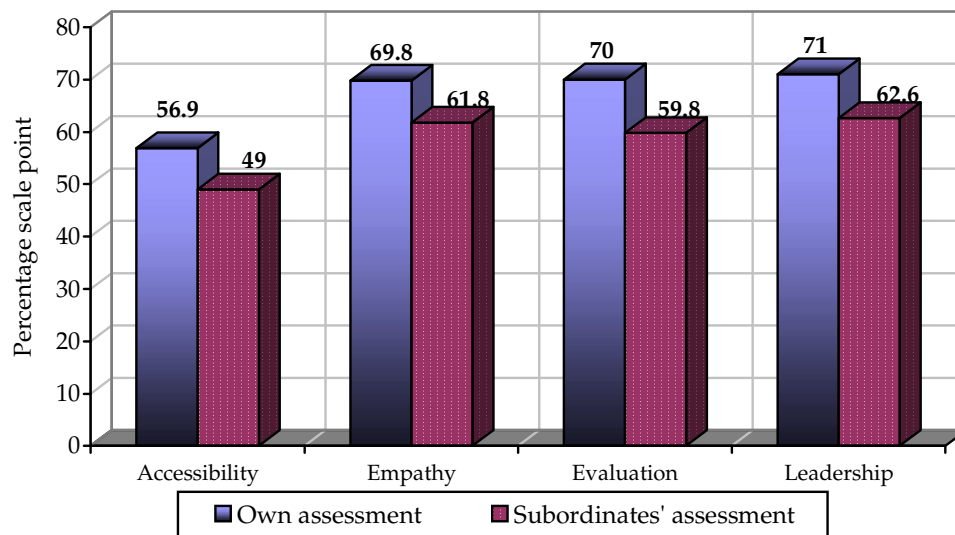


Figure 1: The main categories of managers' skills and attributes as assessed by themselves and by their subordinates

The overall levels of managers' skills are, with the exception of accessibility, reasonable if the subjective measures are taken as yardstick. Accessibility is significantly lower. Especially significant is the fact that in all cases the self-assessment of managers is about 7 to 10 percent higher than the assessment by their subordinates. There is reason to believe that the latter is a more accurate indication of the state of management and that there is a tendency among managers to overrate their own managerial ability. This means that the managers are less likely to be concerned with the current state of management, which they tend to rate higher than it really is. More important is the judgement or opinion of the subordinates, and these are, as indicated in Figure 2, much more reserved.

On further investigation of the comparative assessments as they pertain to the various levels and types of managers (Figure 2) it appears that the differential perceptions occur particularly in respect of the Extension Heads, the Sub-District Extension Coordinators and the Sub-District Heads. These assessment differences are clearly shown in Figure 2 and amount to, on average (across all skill categories), 22.7, 15.5 and 7.1 percent respectively.

In the case of the Extension Heads of District, the big difference in terms of how the Extension Head perceives himself and how he is perceived by his subordinates, could be due to ignorance on the part of the lowest rank officers (frontline extension workers) as far as the role and function of the Extension Head is concerned. This ignorance could be attributed to the distance (both from an organisational level as locality point of view) between these extreme organisational levels. This would apply particularly if the Extension Head failed to visit and interact frequently with the frontline extension personnel. Where this is not the case, frontline extension personnel have ample reason to question the Extension Head's competence in extension. This, in fact, appears to be a possibility, because the biggest assessment difference (32.1 percent) occurs in terms of that category that best reflects extension skills, namely the evaluation skills (see Figure 2).

The Service Centre Heads and District Extension Coordinators appear to have a very realistic view regarding their managerial skills. In the case of the District Extension Coordinators, the subordinates even give

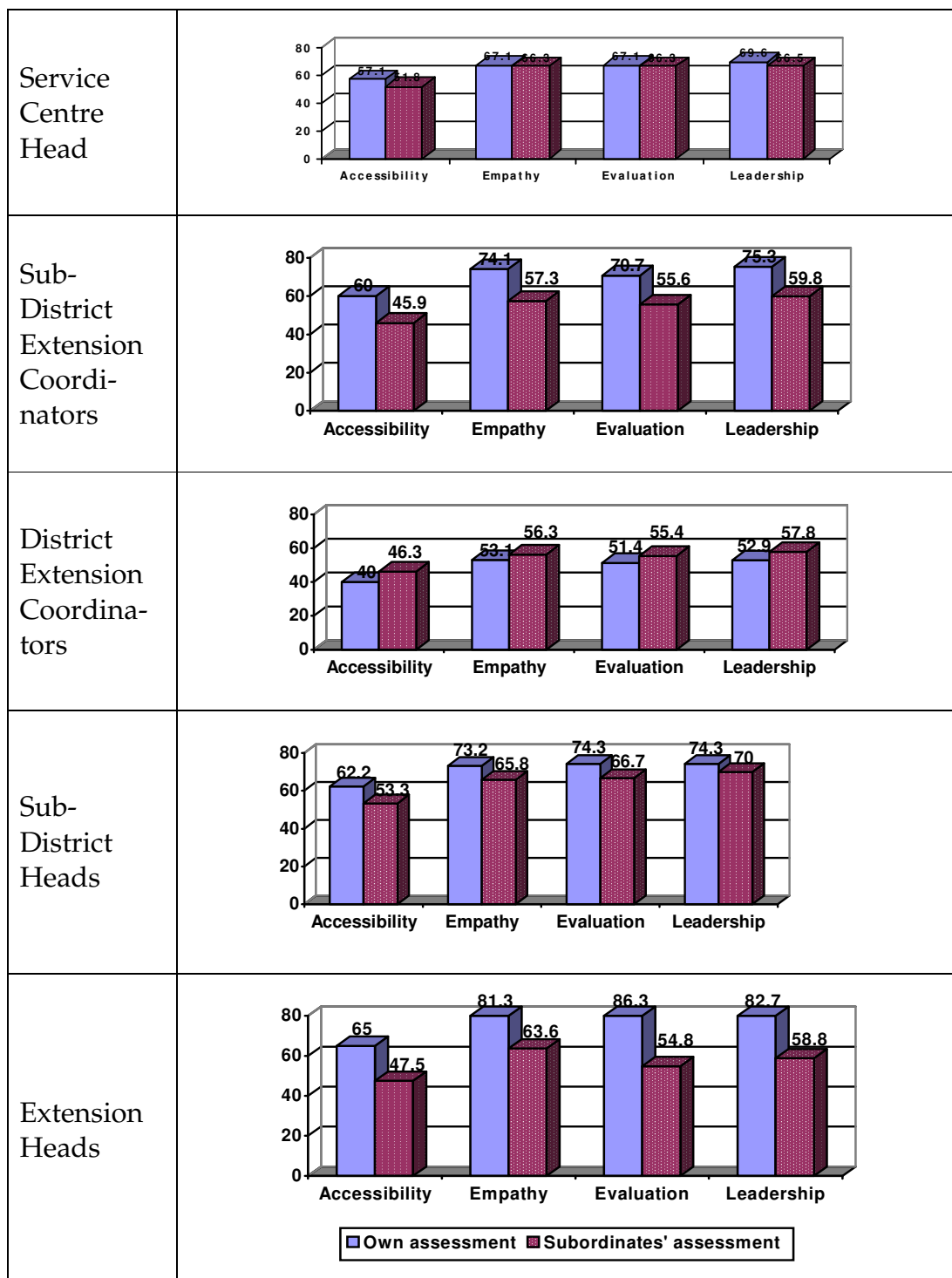


Figure 2: The main category of skills of different levels and types of managers as assessed by themselves as well as by their subordinates

a higher rating than they themselves. This more realistic view provides a sound basis for improvement, which does not seem to be given in the case of the Sub-District Coordinators, and may question the job descriptions or the way these coordinators fulfil their functions.

4.2 Accessibility

Although, strictly speaking not a skill, accessibility is an attribute, which can be an outcome of certain behaviour or skills. The different aspects of accessibility or factors assumed to be associated with it are indicated and assessed in Figure 3.

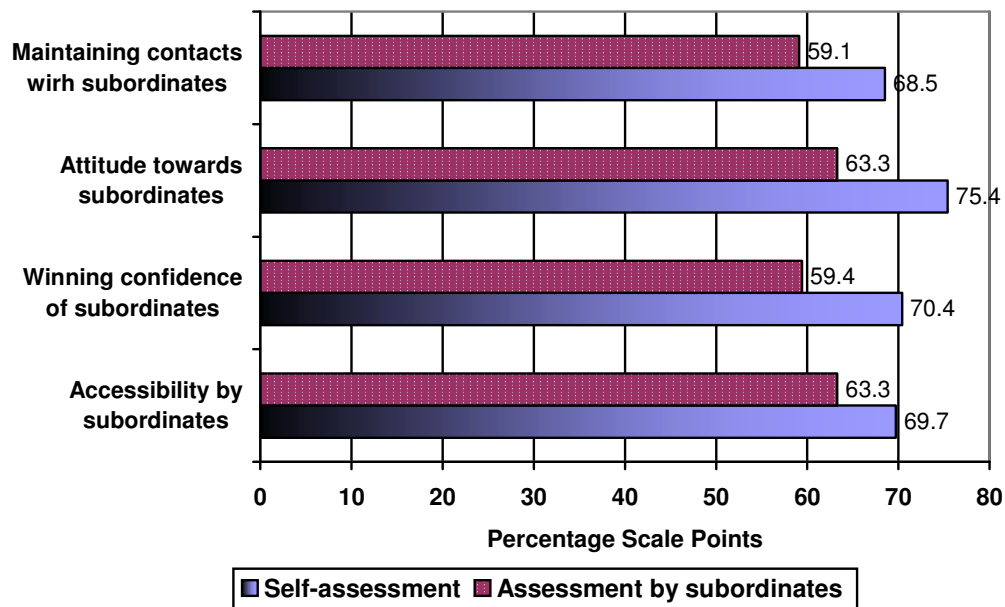


Figure 3: The managers' accessibility as assessed by themselves as well as by their subordinates in regard to different aspects of accessibility

As Figure 3 indicates, the assessments are again characterised by clear differences in the sense that managers tend to rate their own accessibility between 6 and 12 percent higher than their subordinates rate them. The biggest difference (12 percent) occurs in terms of the skill of winning confidence of subordinates. The lacking confidence and contact with personnel appears to be the biggest constraints.

When comparing the different management categories on the basis of differences in assessment between managers and subordinates, clear differences emerge as can be seen in Figure 4.

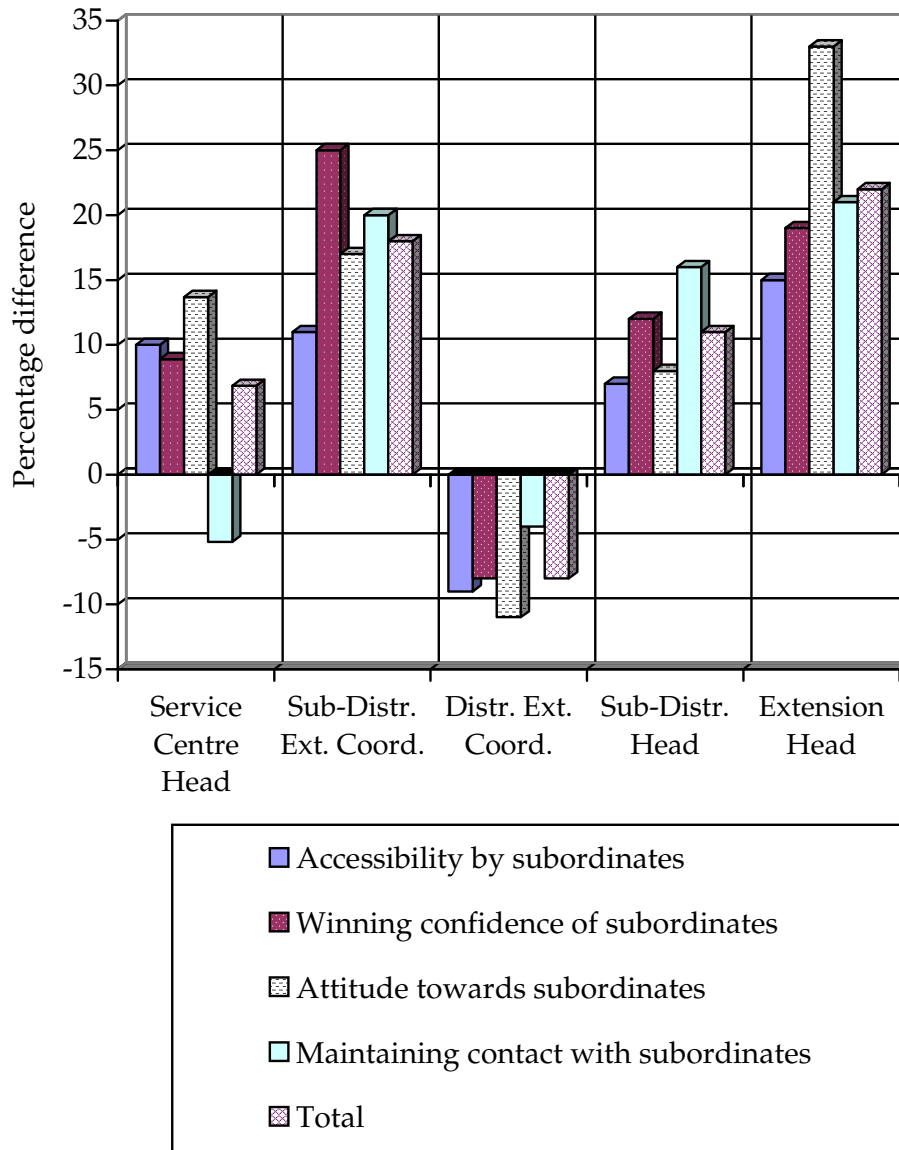


Figure 4: The assessment difference (percentage scale points) between managers in different categories and their subordinates

Again the biggest differences occur in the case of the Extension Heads and the Sub-District Extension Coordinators. The Extension Heads appear to be completely out of touch, especially as far as attitudes towards subordinates are concerned, as they rate themselves about 33.3 percent higher than the subordinates rate them. Similar large-scale differential perceptions occur in the category of Sub-District Extension Coordinators. These managers are similarly out of touch as far as their skill of winning confidence of subordinates is concerned, as their assessment of themselves is about 25 percent higher than those perceived by their subordinates. The much more modest views of the District Extension Coordinators regarding their skills provide an important precondition for improvement as they are aware of their limitations.

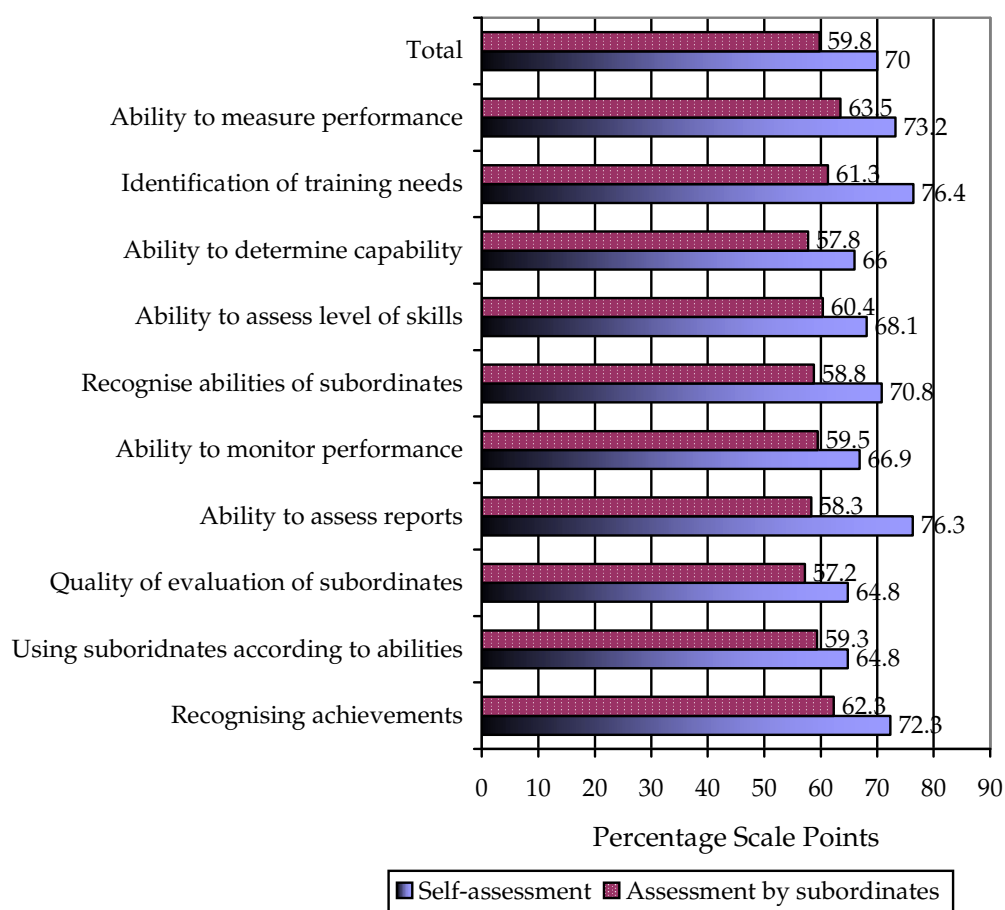


Figure 5: The managers' evaluation skills as assessed by themselves and by their subordinates

4.3 Evaluation skills

Evaluation skills are one of the more important skills, particularly in the South African context, where this aspect leaves a lot to be desired in the public extension service. The assessed evaluation skills and aspects thereof are summarised in Figure 5. Are there any significant differences between the various management categories? The results shedding light on this question are summarised in Figure 6. These results clearly show that once again there are clear differences between the different management categories regarding the scope of assessment differences.

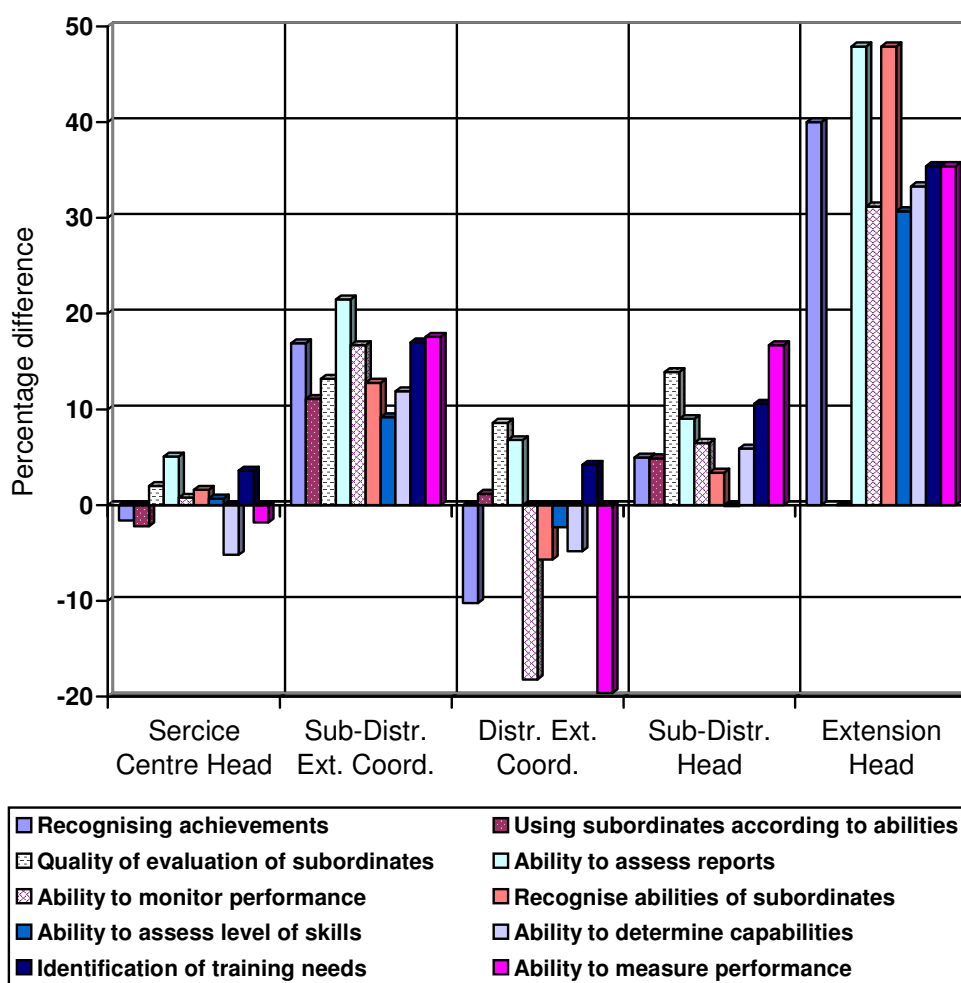


Figure 6: The assessment difference (percentage scale points) between managers in different categories and their subordinates regarding evaluation skills

Again the biggest differences occur in the case of the Extension Heads and the Sub-District Extension Coordinators, but the differences appear to be more extreme in the case of the former, who in many cases overrate their skills by between 30 and 50 percent. Once again the Service Centre Heads and the District Extension Coordinators seem to have the most realistic view regarding their own skills. In regard to several of the skills these categories of leaders even rate the level of their skills lower than the supervisors rate them.

4.4 Leadership skills

A large number of other skills, categorised under leadership, were tested and are summarised in Figure 7.

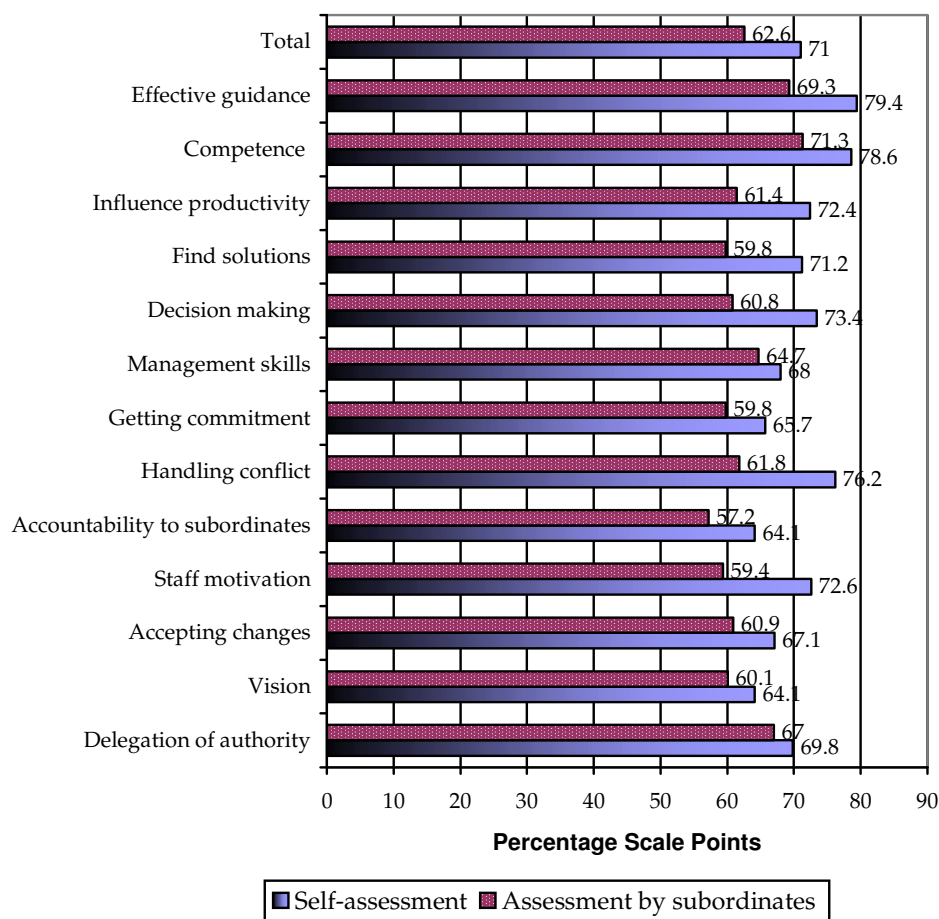


Figure 7: Managers' leadership skills as assessed by themselves as well as by their subordinates

The overall assessment of leadership skills is, with a mean of 62.6 percentage scale points, slightly higher than the evaluation and accessibility skills, but in respect of all of them the managers' own assessments are significantly higher than those of their subordinates. This applies in particular to the handling of conflict (14.4%), staff motivation (13.2%) and decision-making (12.6%).

When comparing the different management categories, more or less the same pattern occurs, with somewhat more variation within the categories. This is illustrated in the findings summarised in Figure 8, and which reflect the percentage scale point differences between the self-assessment by managers and the assessments by subordinates.

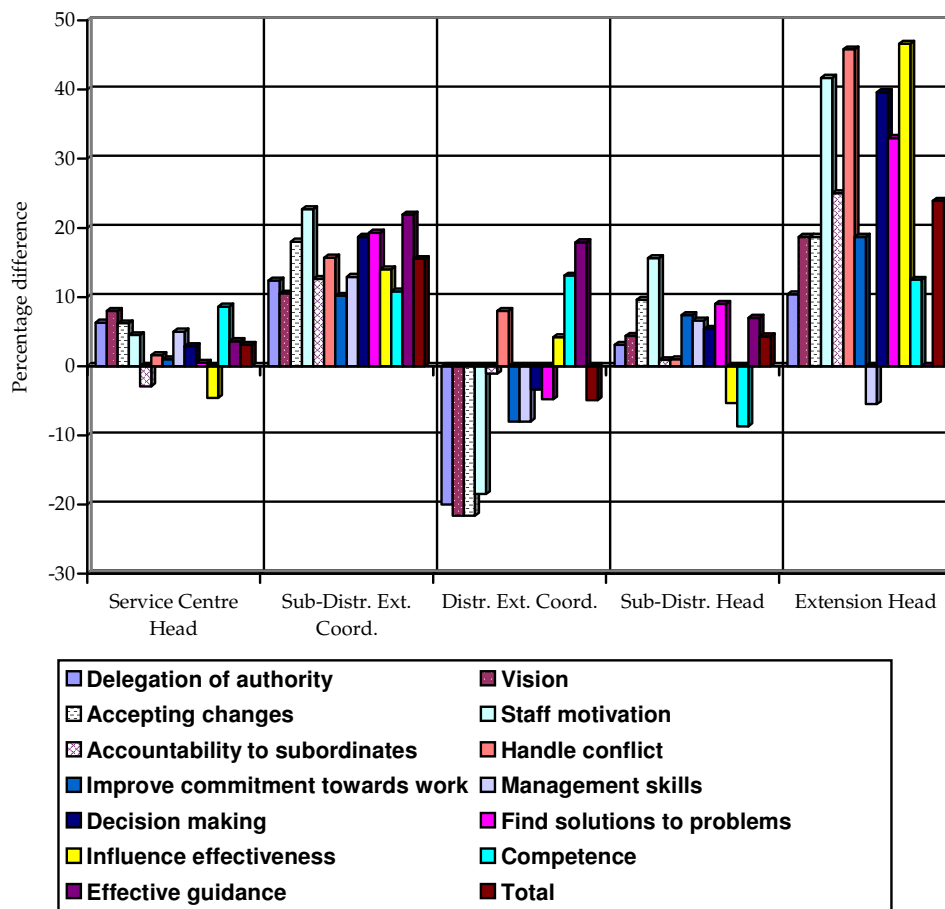


Figure 8: The managers' leadership skills as assessed by themselves as well as by their subordinates

Again the biggest differences (on average about 24 percent) occur in the case of the Extension Heads, but even here the differential perception varies from as low as -5.5 to 46.6 percent.

Another category that is, based on the mean differential assessment of 15,5 percent, somewhat out of touch with reality as far as their own leadership skills are concerned, are the Sub-District Extension Coordinators. Much more realistic in their judgements are the Sub-District Heads (4.3 percent), the Service Centre Heads (3.1 percent) and the District Extension Coordinators.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The general level of management skills is a cause for concern. Although not based on objective measures, it is the perceived assessments of subordinates - the main recipients of the management - that give credence to this conclusion. The fact that subordinates were much less lenient and critical regarding issues that they were not aware of or had not personally experienced, gives further support to the conclusion that the assessments are reasonably accurate or too high, if anything. The general situation is worsened by the fact that the seriousness is not fully appreciated by those who could and should do something about it.

The fact that managers tend to overrate their management skills by approximately ten percent means that they underrate the management problem and are thus less likely to address it. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that this misperception regarding the management skills is worst in the most critical management categories, namely at the supervisory level (Sub-District Extension Coordinators) and the top extension management level (Extension Heads). These are the two management levels that can potentially have the biggest influence on the efficiency of extension delivery.

Whatever the reasons for these big assessment discrepancies, they are symptoms of problems that need urgent attention. In the case of the Extension Heads the lack of contact and more active involvement with frontline extensionists is a big limitation and possibly one of the reasons for subordinates' low assessments of the Extension Head's management skills. However, the opposite is also possible, namely that the low contact protects against an exposure of lacking skills. Whatever the

case, the indications are that so-called neutrally trained managers who have no good knowledge and understanding of extension are not a solution. In the case of the Sub-District Extension Coordinators, all indications are that this category of supervisors is not effective and that the functions or job description need to be revisited.

The problem of poor extension management is a major constraint in the improvement of extension delivery and no time should be wasted in addressing it, especially as far as the areas of selection, commitment, training and additional research are concerned.

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