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A Case Study Exploration of Strategies to Improve First-Line Supervisor Problem-Solving Abilities in the Retail Supermarket Industry

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First-line supervisors in U.S. retail organizations are unable to resolve nearly 34% of typical daily customer problems for their organizations. The purpose of this single-case study was to explore the strategies retail supermarket managers have used to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities within a retail supermarket company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with four retail store manager participants with a successful record of improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. Based on inductive data analysis and methodological triangulation of the data collected, four themes emerged after the data analysis: (a) the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors, (b) coaching first-line supervisors on performance, (c) first-line supervisor learning and development, and (d) measuring first-line supervisor performance. Findings from this study warrant additional empirical exploration of strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities.

Keywords: *problem-solving skills, leadership skills model, first-line supervisor, supermarket retail, management, person-parts perspective, events taxonomy*

Introduction and Background

U.S. retail store managers are typically responsible for providing customers with quality service and memorable shopping experiences (Zairis, 2013). Retail store managers are required to meet organizational goals and effectively supervise their assigned team (Zairis, 2013) and must also provide customers with a positive shopping experience to increase customer satisfaction to facilitate customer loyalty and repeat shopping intentions, ultimately increasing store financial performance (Bagdare, 2013). Customer satisfaction intensifies the relationship between a customer and an organization and is a requisite condition for customer loyalty (Kaura, Durga Prasad, & Sharma, 2015).

The U.S. retail supermarket industry is increasingly competitive. Frontline retail employees deliver managers' intended service practices and influence customer satisfaction and perceptions of quality (Jha, 2013). First-line supervisors manage the frontline delivery of customer service and must possess the ability to handle multiple accountabilities and resolve organization and leadership problems (Lloyd & Payne, 2014). Ha, Akamavi, Kitchen, and Janda (2014) suggested poor supermarket customer experience might lead to customer dissatisfaction.

Jarvis (2016) established the basis for exploring more deeply strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Retail store managers rely on first-line supervisors and frontline employees to deliver quality service to satisfy customers in an effort to create quality customer experiences and loyalty (Jha, 2013). Customer loyalty is an outgrowth of customer satisfaction and is critical to conducting business in a competitive and unpredictable marketplace (Komunda & Osarenkhoe, 2012). A major challenge encountered by retail supermarket managers is the need to collaborate with first-line supervisors to achieve customer satisfaction; however, first-line supervisors sometimes lack skills and adequate training for this task (Townsend, 2013). Bloom, Genakos, Sadun, and Van Reenen (2012) and Martinelli and Balboni (2012) suggested a positive relationship between management quality and organizational performance.

Osarenkhoe and Komunda (2013) emphasized the importance of management effectiveness in resolving customer complaints, and ensuring employee effectiveness had a direct influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty constructs. Lloyd and Payne (2014) described the influence of managerial effectiveness as being affected by a dichotomy in some supervisory roles where the supervisor functions as both a customer-facing worker, as well as a supervisor to other employees. Conversely, Bloom et al. (2012) suggested deficiencies in extant literature related to causality and patterns of managerial behavior, and skills, affecting organizational performance results. It is therefore critical to gain understanding of how retail store managers improve first-line supervisor skills to achieve customer satisfaction.

While there was a wealth of literature (Dinh et al., 2014; Meuser et al., 2016) that addressed leadership approaches and theories, little research was conducted pertaining to strategies retail managers can use to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills through the lens of the skills-based leadership model. Dinh et al. (2014) noted the incidence of skills-based leadership theory studies was relatively low in scholarly literature. Additionally, Dinh et al. asserted thematic views of leadership, such as skills-based leadership, offer limited insight into how processes used by leaders' influence performance outcomes. For example, Dinh et al. concluded researchers should address intertwined leadership processes to understand how organizational social systems influence evolving events.

This study addressed this gap in literature by contributing to the person-parts perspective of leadership literature. Hoffman and Lord (2013) contended person-parts perspective focused on the effects of leadership on performance activities and events. Findings from this study should help address Hoffman and Lord's (2013) assertion that developing proactive leadership skills in creating and responding to events is necessary to provide consistency, predictability, and structure for followers, as well as contribute to discerning a leader's impact on organizational performance.

Problem Statement

First-line supervisors in retail organizations are unable to resolve nearly 34% of typical daily customer problems effectively for their organizations (Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013). According to representatives of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), organizations had more than 1.1 million first-line supervisors whose ineffectiveness negatively influences customer complaint recovery, affect customer satisfaction, and directly contribute to organizational performance (Martinelli & Balboni, 2012; Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013). The general business problem is retail supermarket industry first-line supervisors have insufficient abilities to reduce daily customer problems, which negatively affect retail managers' ability to maintain customer satisfaction. The

specific business problem is some retail supermarket managers lack strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this qualitative study was the skills-based leadership model developed by Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Fleishman (2000). Mumford et al. suggested that leadership is a type of skilled performance. We used the skills-based leadership model in this study as an explanation for strategies employed to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Key constructs underlying the skills-based leadership model include (a) problem-solving skills, (b) social judgment and social skills, and (c) knowledge (Mumford et al., 2000). Mumford et al. asserted that each skill set is associated with various forms of knowledge and skills and knowledge grow as a function of experience as leaders progress through their careers. Bauer, Schmitt, Morwitz, and Winer (2013) asserted supervisors influence customer satisfaction, and improving supervisors' decision making might be valuable to facilitating beneficial customer acquisition and retention decisions.

Literature Review

Retail supermarket managers rely on first-line supervisors to achieve desired strategy execution, customer service and satisfaction, employee development and performance, operational delivery, and store performance (Townsend, Loudoun, & Troth, 2016). The first-line supervisor role is complex, dichotomous, and works closest to the operating core of the organization with responsibilities for supervision for customer-facing employees (Townsend & Russell, 2013). First-line supervisors face myriad pressures including managing human resources (HR) policies, managing budgets, staff development and communication, people management, and customer interaction (Townsend & Russell, 2013). However, in some respects the development of the first-line supervisor role is not adequate to achieve desired goals (Townsend, 2013).

Skills-Based Leadership Model

The conceptual framework for this research was based on the skills-based leadership model. Mumford et al. (2000) developed the skills-based leadership model, which states that leadership is a type of skilled performance. Mumford et al. (2000) asserted that each skill is a capability associated with various forms of knowledge, and skills and knowledge grow as a function of experience as leaders progress through their careers. This aligned with Katz's (1955) conclusion that effective leadership/administration depends on the skills of the administrator/leader. Powers (2014) also identified leadership as a skill a manager may need at various points in the management process. The leadership skills model is skill-centered versus leader-centered (Mumford et al., 2000).

Senior retail leaders and store managers should seek to understand how first-line supervisors develop leadership skills and knowledge. Powers (2014) suggested managers acquire knowledge and skills, including leadership skills, through a combination of career and life experiences, development programs and experience in the current organization. Furthermore, learned skills are important for effective leadership by first-line managers (Petkevičiūtė & Giedraitis, 2013). Organizations should therefore develop first-line supervisor capabilities, or competencies, to assure effective frontline execution of business goals.

Leadership skills are a set of capabilities that first-line supervisors can employ to resolve leadership and organizational problems. Leadership and management skills and knowledge are critical to developing organizational innovation competencies, as well as broader organizational capabilities (Kivipõld, 2015). Key constructs underlying the skills-based leadership model include (a) individual attributes, (b) competencies, and (c) leadership outcomes (Mumford et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013). The literature search for this study showed a gap in the literature, with few case studies specifically examining how to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. However, results from a single-case study conducted within a Finnish department store showed the importance of effective first-line supervisor skills including daily contact (communication) between supervisors and subordinates, as well as the importance of daily feedback (Janhonen & Lindström, 2015).

Individual Attributes

Successful leaders must possess certain traits that enable development of key skills and abilities. Individual attributes of the skills-based leadership model include (a) general cognitive ability, (b) crystalized cognitive ability, (c) motivation, and (d) personality (Mumford et al., 2000). For instance, Mumford, Watts, and Partlow (2015) asserted leaders should possess necessary cognitive capacities to apply leadership skills in solving organizational problems. Furthermore, possessing traits associated with intellectual, perceptual, and reasoning abilities appear to contribute to a leader's attainment of problem-solving and social judgment skills (Germain, 2012). Traits inform skill building associated with expertise, including problem solving.

Some attributes of expertise are intrinsic and considered unteachable; however, skills such as problem solving, social judgment, and knowledge can be acquired by the learner through training (Germain, 2012). Individual leader attributes such as motivation orientation also aid in explaining leadership effectiveness (Zaccaro, 2012). Dinh and Lord (2012) suggested that a leader's personality might influence how the leader responds to situations. However, Dinh and Lord (2012) indicated leadership skills and learned behaviors mediate a leader's traits. Kalargyrou, Pescosolido, and Kalargiros (2012) stated that the skills-based leadership model identifies traits as important attributes of skill development and leader performance outcomes; however, traits are secondary in importance to competencies.

Competencies

Competencies include knowledge, skills, and abilities an organization deems critical for performance. Kaplan and Norton (2004) proposed competencies included skills and knowledge needed to execute internal processes that support an organization's strategy. For example, Yu and Ramanathan (2013) found employee competencies significantly affected achievement of operations strategy and cost reductions in a retail environment. Similarly, Kivipõld (2015) identified effective leadership competencies as critical to gaining competitive advantage. For example, Trivellas and Reklitis (2014) sampled 132 managers in Greek companies and found that managerial effectiveness was positively associated with core competencies, including decision making, conflict management, and communication. Organizations should therefore identify leadership competencies to achieve superior performance.

Leadership competency profiles might form the basis of leadership development. Northouse (2013) asserted leadership competencies were key factors for effective leadership performance. Furthermore, Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) suggested leader skill development is dependent on experiential learning that occurs as an individual interacts with the organizational environment. In sum, the skills-based leadership model includes three competencies (a) problem-solving skills, (b) social judgment and social skills, and (c) knowledge (Mumford et al., 2000).

Problem-Solving Skills

Problem-solving capabilities are critical skills for organizational leaders. Within the skills-based leadership model, Mumford et al. (2000) identified problem-solving skills as the capacity to solve ill-defined and unique problems germane to organizational leadership roles. Likewise, Nazem, Mozaiini, and Seifi (2014) asserted that nonroutine problem resolution requires creative thinking and problem-solving capabilities. Furthermore, leadership problem-solving skills include (a) defining problems, (b) gather problem-related information, (c) ability to formulate new insights about the problem, and (d) generate solution options, or alternatives, for problems (Northouse, 2013). Additionally, leadership problem-solving skills enable leaders to address problems with solutions to position the organization to accomplish desired goals (Longenecker & Yonker, 2013). The ability to solve problems requires skill development by leaders.

Organizations should include problem-solving skill development in leader competency development. Nazem et al. (2014) noted creative problem-solving skill development is critical and elements include preparation, establishment, illumination, and confirmation. Moreover, Mumford et al. (2000) asserted creative problem-solving skills influenced leader performance. Longenecker and Yonker (2013) suggested problem solving associated with organizational change requires effectual decision-making. Organizational problems might be routine, or unique, and may require adaptability and change leadership by first-line supervisors and other organizational leaders. Nazem et al. (2014) further indicated social skills might enhance problem-solving abilities.

Social Judgment and Social Skills

People skills are critical for leaders in organizations to solve organizational problems and gain competitive advantage through people. First-line supervisor problem-solving skills require development of social complexity capability to differentiate personal and relational aspects of social situations to enhance understanding and integrate into effective alternatives and solutions (De Meuse, Dai, Swisher, Eichinger, & Lombardo, 2012). Leaders implement effective organizational problem solutions within a social context (Mumford et al., 2000). Mumford et al. further suggested leaders must possess social performance skills, including communication, persuasion, negotiation, conflict management, and coaching.

Retail managers should seek to understand the significance of first-line supervisors' communication skills to organizational outcomes. Steele and Plenty (2015) contended that communication competence is critical for leaders. Steele and Plenty (2015) further suggested leaders utilize communication to accomplish desired goals, provide direction to achieve organizational goals, and create a favorable viewpoint in subordinates. Teague and Roche (2012) found first-line supervisor engagement in workplace conflict management and resolution required formal training and ongoing skill assessment to ensure higher positive employee relations climate. Germain (2012) asserted leaders should be alert to social environment of the organization, as well as be socially skilled. Kivipõld (2015) indicated advanced organizational leadership social capability permits organizations to implement specific management activities for social outcomes and the coordination of knowledge to generate innovative behaviors. Retail managers should therefore ensure first-line supervisors develop needed communication skills.

Knowledge

Customers, employees, and managers often view first-line supervisors as subject-matter experts for their assigned areas of responsibility. Swanson and Kent (2014) concluded that a leader's perceived level of expertise and knowledge by other organizational members was a critical aspect in the leadership process. Petkevičiūtė and Giedraitis (2013) posited that first-line supervisors were more

effective when personal expertise aligns with skills and knowledge of the first-line supervisor's workgroup. This suggests that acquisition of experiential expertise is critical for leaders.

Knowledge acquired through experience and experiential learning is critical in how leaders define problems, evaluate constraints, and implement plans (Mumford et al., 2000). Knowledge structures including knowledge of problem states, knowledge of organization, and knowledge of people support cognitive processes leaders employ when solving organizational problems (Zaccaro, 2012). Knowledge is the cache of conceptual frameworks, including experiences, and information utilized to apply and implement leader problem-solving skills (Northouse, 2013). Additionally, Kivipõld (2015) asserted leadership knowledge and skills enable coordination as a necessary means to develop organizational capabilities. In sum, how a leader dynamically interacts with the organizational environment in developing and applying necessary problem-solving skills is key in understanding leader performance (Mumford et al., 2000).

Leadership Outcomes
First-line supervisors are responsible for executing organizational strategies and goals. Bloom et al. (2012) indicated effective management performance and practices could positively improve organizational performance. Furthermore, Bauer et al. (2013) concluded managers face a variety of complex problems in their daily duties and decision-making. Additionally, effective management practices might include setting and executing goals, planning and scheduling activities, and developing subordinates (Preenen, van Vianen, & de Pater, 2014). Bauer et al. (2013) indicated more experienced leaders tend to use reasoning and intuition simultaneously in decision making related to problem solving. To understand the effect of leader outcomes on organizational performance, it is necessary to analyze leadership at the event-level.

First-line supervisors interact with stakeholders and assigned duties through a series of interactions. Event-focused measurement might help organizations understand the time and place influences of leader outcomes on individual, group, and organizational performance (Hoffman & Lord, 2013). Dinh and Lord (2012) suggested the importance of analyzing leadership at an event-level might aid in understanding how leaders develop personal identity and acquire leadership skills. Hoffman and Lord (2013) further suggested as leadership skills develop responses to unique events might become ordinary and potentially routine. A leader must adjust to a wide spectrum of tasks and social circumstances that influence the leader's perception and performance due to changing intrapersonal processes (Dinh & Lord, 2012). Consequently, Dinh and Lord (2012) indicated a leader's developmental growth might change at an elemental level by experiencing significant leadership events. Because leaders must adjust to constant changes in the competitive environment, enabling ongoing learning and adaptability are crucial leadership outcomes.

Continuous learning and the ability to make course corrections are important aspects for organizational leaders to achieve competitive advantage in the marketplace. De Meuse et al. (2012) described learning and doing as being inseparable, and leaders' learning activities emerged in response to lessons created by dealing with critical incidents that might include uncertain outcomes, consequences of actions, meaningful opportunities, and problems. Likewise, leaders must assure they embolden employees to develop skills for change, as well as create an organizational structure to sustain an effective organizational culture (Onatolu, 2013). Furthermore, change management skills and processes might provide elements of continuous improvement, learning and systemic reform (Neuman, 2012). In addition, an effective change management process prepares the organization for sustainability and organizational stability (Neuman, 2012). Change and adaptability are crucial as is the ability to provide conflict leadership.

Conflict leadership and management is a critical leadership outcome. Conflict is present in all organizations and may influence employee engagement (Soieb, Othman, & D'Silva, 2013). Shetach (2012) noted successful management involves extracting and maximizing the potential essence of conflict situations, related communications processes, and negotiations. However, Saundry, Jones, and Wibberley (2015) indicated many frontline managers are not adequately prepared to handle dispute and conflict resolution. To influence conflict management leaders should create a persistent flow of information between organizational actors and stakeholders and the need for expanded conversation and dialogue between internal and external stakeholders (Rai, Keil, Hornyak, & Wüllenweber, 2012). The nature of organizational conflict leadership, change management, and understanding leadership execution at the event-level underscore the situational nature of leadership.

The retail environment is dynamic and creates the need for leaders to utilize differing leadership techniques based on the situation. Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) suggested leadership was situational. Furthermore, stakeholder conceptions of leader effectiveness might differ based on circumstances and the situation (Gilbert, Myrtle, & Sohi, 2014). Additionally, Tang, Liu, Oh, and Weitz (2014) noted retail organizations should employ management training in situational leadership techniques to address differing socialization needs of subordinates. In addition to situational leadership techniques, leaders should create a positive environment to achieve leadership outcomes.

Leaders might achieve desired outcomes by creating a collaborative environment for subordinates. Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) indicated that influence and collaboration, as well as commitment to shared values and goals were determinants of both perceptions of informal leadership and perceptions of effective formal leadership. Furthermore, leaders should create an inclusive culture in a workgroup to provide benefits related to improved communication, improved problem solving, and team cohesion (Scott, Heathcote, & Gruman, 2011). Additionally, Nienaber and Svensson (2013) indicated the importance of involving employees in a bottoms-up approach to organizational performance results. Next, it is a critical comparison of the skills-based leadership model with other leadership models.

Other Leadership Models
The skills-based leadership model focuses on attributes, competencies, and outcomes of leaders centered on skills leaders use to solve organizational problems. However, leadership theory includes a wide variety of perspectives on the definition of leadership, as well as the essence of leadership constructs (DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty, & Salas, 2010; Unsar & Karalar, 2013). Considering skills-based leadership from a model perspective, Kalargyrou et al. (2012) identified inclusion of traits in the skills-based model as a potential weakness, and thus, not a pure skills model. Furthermore, Kalargyrou et al. (2012) further suggested potential limited generalizability as another potential weakness because the studies focused solely on military personnel. Conversely, Mumford et al. (2000) contended that the skills-based model might help explain precepts of transformational leadership, style, leader–manager exchange and others by identifying and linking underlying skills associated with application of those models. Skills-based leadership model was compared with trait, transactional, transformational, leader–manager exchange approaches, and the emergent leadership construct of shared leadership, as these models are most-often linked to individual–leader outcomes (DeChurch et al., 2010).

Given the evolving first-line supervisor role and the influence of employee involvement (EI) initiatives, it is critical to consider aspects of shared or distributed leadership. Dinh and Lord (2012)

described shared, or distributed, leadership as an emergent leadership prototype in which leadership occurs at the group-level. Dinh and Lord (2012) further noted distributed leadership occurs where an individual informally assumes, or a group formally grants an individual, leadership responsibility within a particular context. EI schemes emphasize high levels of employee autonomy and decision-making (Benson, Kimmel, & Lawler, 2014). In comparison with skills-based leadership, emergent leadership environments might require leader cognitive skills that enable simplifying problems for followers (Mumford et al., 2015). Understanding aspects of the skills-based leadership model is critical to the discussion of strategies retail store managers utilize to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Next, we review literature pertaining to organizational and leadership problems typically handled by first-line supervisors.

Organizational and Leadership Problems Handled by First-Line Supervisors

Strategy Implementation

Frontline employees execute retail supermarket strategy. Strategy implementation is a critical role for first-line supervisors (Townsend, 2013). First-line supervisor strategy implementation requires ensuring adequate planning, prioritization, employee alignment, and engagement, skill development of assigned resources, as well as monitoring (Townsend, 2013). Moreover, organizations should ensure first-line managers possess the abilities, motivation, and opportunity to implement strategic initiatives (Firoz & Chowdhury, 2013). Additionally, Nasir, Abbas, and Zafar (2014) suggested that because of increasingly dynamic environments, organizations might need to implement changes in strategy, structure, process, and culture. Effective strategy implementation requires that first-line supervisors properly execute market policies.

Executing Market Policies

To execute market policies, first-line supervisors must ensure frontline employee alignment and understanding of marketing strategies and policies. Boukis, Kaminakis, Siampos, and Kostopoulos (2015) concluded internal marketing (IM) positively contributes to more effective implementation of organizational external marketing strategies, as well as motivates and leverages discretionary efforts demonstrated by individual frontline employees. IM orientation significantly contributes to customer satisfaction (Kaur Sahi, Lonial, Gupta, & Seli, 2013). Additionally, a supervisor's adoption of IM might yield higher employee responsiveness in service excellence delivery (Boukis et al., 2015). Successful implementation of a marketing process that collaboratively achieves desired results for consumers and organizations requires managers to ensure effective internal company networks for employees (Zhu, 2014). In sum, Boukis et al. (2015) asserted managers were the most critical group to assure successful implementation of effective IM strategies. In addition to ensuring execution of market policies, first-line supervisor must also assure operational efficiencies.

Operational Efficiencies

First-line supervisors encounter business problems related to operational efficiencies. Askenazy, Berry, Carré, Prunier-Poulmaire, and Tilly (2012) noted retail managerial performance essentials include cost control in all aspects of the operation including labor, the need for flexible deployment of labor, as well as provisioning adequate levels of service. Similarly, Price (2016) suggested that in most instances, first-line supervisors do not set sales, cost, or labor budgets. However, Price indicated first-line supervisors are responsible for delivering against key performance indicators to achieve budgeted operational targets. Consequently, as the competitive environment heats up first-line supervisors must keep the operational budget balanced even with compressed sales (Townsend & Russell, 2013). In addition to operational efficiencies, first-line supervisors must tackle problems associated with customer interactions.

Customer Interactions

First-line supervisors must assure positive customer interactions through delivering standards, personal example, planning, and employee training and coaching. Iyer and Johlke (2015) suggested managers should model positive customer behavior to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, Bauer et al. (2013) asserted supervisors influence customer satisfaction and improving supervisors' decision making might be valuable to facilitating beneficial customer acquisition and retention decisions. Furthermore, organizations need to educate frontline employees to assess accurately customer expectations to ensure customer delight and increase an employee's ability to deal with dynamic and stressful service situations and environments (Barnes, Collier, & Robinson, 2014). While assuring quality of customer interactions, first-line supervisors must balance customer service with operational efficiency.

Balancing Customer Service and Operational Efficiency

Balancing quality customer service and operational efficiency might cause myriad problems for first-line supervisors. Evans (2015) suggested first-line supervisors were under pressure to control costs while simultaneously required to raise the competence of employees to deliver increasing levels of customer service. Furthermore, Luria, Yagil, and Gal (2014) indicated organizations might cause first-line supervisor and employee role conflict through double message situations in which they communicate financial indicators through one-channel and quality indicators through training or official communications channels. Conversely, organizations can reduce customer related transaction costs while improving customer service through marketing and customer relationship management to create value for customers and the organization (Persson, 2013). Improving efficiency and customer service requires investment in resources and systems and failure to invest properly can lead to customer dissatisfaction.

Customer Dissatisfaction

Customer dissatisfaction is a leading cause of lost revenue, profitability, and customer loyalty. Osarenkhoe and Komunda (2013) asserted management effectiveness in resolving customer complaints, as well as ensuring employee effectiveness had direct influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty constructs. Complicating the customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction continuum, store staff may lack competence in handling customer complaints and fail to resolve issues (Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013). Additionally, Bagdare (2013) noted retail frontline employees enhanced or sabotaged organizational brand based on the effectiveness of their performance relative to customer satisfaction and experience. Moreover, Guchait, Simons, and Pasamehmetoglu (2015) contended manager behavior perceived as ingenuous, including compromises in development and enforcement of service standards was ineffective and might counter service recovery practices. Complexities in customer interactions magnify the importance of the people-management-role first-line supervisors perform.

People Management

People management is a critical aspect of first-line supervisor's role. Loveland, Thompson, Lounsbury, and Gibson (2016) suggested effective frontline management revolved around highly social tasks to build strong relationships with subordinates along with customers. Townsend and Russell (2013) concluded first-line supervisors were critical to distributing internal communications to employees as intended by senior and middle managers. Townsend and Russell (2013) also suggested that first-line supervisors provide subordinates with an alternative management outlet to voice and resolve concerns versus escalating to higher levels of management. Conversely, Evans (2015) indicated the disparate strategies of cost containment and quality enhancement within

customer service context constrained first-line supervisors in people management role. Ensuring a supply of qualified, effective resources is a critical aspect of the first-line supervisor's people management responsibilities.

Staffing

First-line supervisors should be involved in the hiring process to assure selection of talented resources that fit the role and organization. Organizations should seek to hire talented staff that to expand the skills-base and outperform competitors (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Hurrell and Scholarios (2014) indicated managers should design and execute recruitment and selection processes that support person-brand fit to reduce social skill gaps, especially in customer service interactions. Furthermore, Hurrell and Scholarios (2014) asserted organizational induction, training, and socialization practices should be contrived to facilitate allowing employees take an active role to understand their social surroundings to reduce social skills gaps, as well as inculcate cultural values. In sum, proper staffing and induction are important elements first-line supervisor people management and effectiveness. Adequate management communication is critical for frontline organizational success.

Communication

Creating an environment open, candid, and provides for employee voice is crucial for first-line supervisors. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) concluded regular dyadic communication between first-line supervisors and subordinates is critical for organizational performance. Additionally, supervisor communication and perspective taking positively influenced cooperation by assigned employees, and positively influenced financial and relational outcomes (Mor, Morris, & Joh, 2013). Specifically, managers who maintained a reciprocal communication relationship with subordinates may send distinct messages verbally and nonverbally that positively influenced unit outcomes (Mathe, Scott-Halsell, & Roseman, 2013). Conversely, Mathe et al. (2013) noted failing to maintain a reciprocal relationship with subordinates might inhibit completing goals, standards, or tasks needed to provide excellent service and customer satisfaction. First-line supervisor people-management-capabilities might affect employee effectiveness and performance.

Employee Effectiveness and Performance

First-line supervisors directly influence subordinate effectiveness and performance. Hurrell and Scholarios (2014) indicated managers should reinforce employee behaviors in customer service contexts that align with organizational brand image. First-line supervisors typically lead subordinate learning that is informal, hands-on, operationally focused, realistic and focused on the immediate situation to complete work tasks (Cohen, 2013). Moreover, first-line supervisor coaching abilities influenced employee role clarity, satisfaction, commitment, and were positively associated with organizational and personal performance (Kim, Egan, Kim, & Kim, 2013). Adding to the complexity of the first-line role are responsibilities associated with HR management and employee relations policies.

Human Resource Management and Employee Relations Policies

Implementing and enforcing HR management and employee relations policies are essential elements for line leaders. Townsend and Russell (2013) noted first-line supervisors are increasingly responsible for enacting HR policies devolved from HR as the closest supervisor to frontline employees. Evans (2015) suggested first-line supervisors are critical to the implementation of employee relations and HR management strategies. Additionally, a first-line supervisor might enact organizational HR policies from a hierarchical perspective or operate as an employee coach by utilizing HR policies to advance and develop employee competence (Kilroy & Dundon, 2015). First-

line supervisors must navigate problems associated with alignment of organizational practices and policies.

First-line supervisor success in implementing HR management and employee relations policies are directly associated with organizational alignment. Sikora and Ferris (2014) proposed organizational leaders should insure organizational and operational practices and policies align to increase the probability that first-line managers will effectively implement HR practices. Furthermore, Sikora and Ferris (2014) asserted senior leaders should address organizational issues and related frontline supervisor communications prior to rolling out new HR practices. Additionally, Sikora and Ferris (2014) suggested first-line supervisors' ability, and ability or willingness, to execute the organization's HR practices might influence essential employee outcomes such as intention to leave (turnover), job satisfaction, job performance, and procedural justice perceptions. Changes in the first-line supervisor role might complicate organizational and leadership problems handled by first-line supervisors.

Changing First-Line Supervisor Role

  As the retail environment continues to evolve, the first-line supervisor role might change and adapt to assure competitive implementation of business strategy at the frontline. Townsend and Russell (2013) noted incumbent first-line supervisors described the content and volume of responsibilities of the first-line supervisor role as changing. In addition, Townsend and Russell (2013) suggested escalating changes might influence problem solving effectiveness, as well as recall. Furthermore, job enlargement in first-line supervisor accountabilities might negatively influence quality of work and attention to detail (Townsend & Russell, 2013). As the first-line supervisor role evolves, organizations must ensure skill development keeps pace with changes.

First-line supervisor skill development, effectiveness measures, and employee voice initiatives influence the success profile of the first-line supervisor role. Trivellas and Reklitis (2014) contended managers who possessed higher levels of leadership competencies were likely to produce higher levels job performance and job satisfaction. Likewise, knowledge, competency development, and interest in the role might influence first-line supervisor job satisfaction and performance (Trivellas & Reklitis, 2014). Additionally, appropriate support structures were necessary to assure first-line supervisor effectiveness in the performance of their role. Moreover, EI schemes that emphasize high levels of employee autonomy and decision-making might require first-line supervisors to become effective change leaders to address potential issues associated with EI (Benson et al., 2014). The literature pertaining to the changing first-line supervisor role helps illuminate influences those changes impose on the role. Next, we discuss literature pertaining to the influences of customer satisfaction and organization performance on the first-line supervisor role.

Customer Satisfaction and Organization Performance

Customer satisfaction is inherently important to retail organizations as it leads to positive business outcomes and customer loyalty leading to competitive advantage. Customer satisfaction is a gauge of how a retail store fulfills customers' expectations (Jayasankaraprasad & Kumar, 2012). Customer satisfaction is the outcome of a customer's reaction to experience in comparison with expectations (Esbjerg et al., 2012). Customer satisfaction exerted influence on store loyalty, future purchase intentions, word-of-mouth communication, price sensitivity, and customer complaint behavior (Jayasankaraprasad, & Kumar, 2012). First-line supervisors must manage aspects of the customer experience in an effort to reinforce elements of the service-profit-chain.

Service-Profit Chain

Frontline employees influence customer perceptions of the effectiveness of elements of an organization's service-profit-chain through execution of practices. Jayasankaraprasad, and Kumar (2012) concluded that customer satisfaction is directly tied to store loyalty and repurchase intentions that significantly influence store profitability. Likewise, customer loyalty is critical to conducting business in a competitive and unpredictable marketplace (Komunda & Osarenkhoe, 2012). The service-profit-chain should increase value and stakeholder connectedness.

First-line supervisors must ensure effective, consistent delivery of service expectations to increase the likelihood of perceived value by customers. Kaplan and Norton (2004) noted organizations might achieve perceived value by customers through assuring an enticing value proposition potentially increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty relative to other organizations. Furthermore, organizations may improve stakeholder connectedness, profitability and growth through revitalizing their governance structures and decision-making, including inculcation of corporate social responsibility competencies (Filatotchev & Nakajima, 2014). Another aspect of customer satisfaction and organization performance is service quality.

Service Quality

First-line supervisors directly influence execution of service programs, and the quality of delivery of those programs, to customers. Guchait, Kim, and Namasivayam (2012) suggested customers tend to praise or blame good or bad service delivery situations on frontline employees, supervisors, and leadership of the store and service organization. Dong and Siu (2013) found customers' evaluation of a service experience reflected perceptions and feelings about the entire servicescape and encounter. Furthermore, Martinelli and Balboni (2012) confirmed the importance of service quality in retail as a critical determinant of competitive advantage, and specifically, organizational performance. Frontline quality of delivery of customer service appears to influence customer satisfaction and overall perceptions of the service organization. First-line supervisors are responsible for delivering quality customer service in an effort to assure positive organization performance, however, some retail store managers lack strategies to improve first-line problem-solving skills when first-line supervisor performance does not meet expectations.

Why Managers Lack Strategies

Retail store managers may lack strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities for a number of reasons. Ladany, Mori, and Mehr (2013) concluded that ineffective first-line supervisor skills, behaviors, and techniques are attributable, in part, to inadequate supervisory preparation and accountability. Furthermore, retail store managers may lack clear direction and performance management tools to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Additionally, a lack of first-line supervisor role clarity might influence skill improvement strategies.

Retail store managers might lack strategies for reducing first-line supervisor role ambiguity in the face of increasing competitive complexity. Johlke and Iyer (2013) asserted frontline employees in a retail store must span the boundary between customers and the organization and attempt to balance potentially conflicting role expectations. Additionally, Rigopoulou, Theodosiou, Katsikea, and Perdikis (2012) concluded role ambiguity to have a negative influence on first-line supervisor motivation. Conversely, Rigopoulou et al. (2012) noted clarifying role accountabilities might improve first-line supervisor motivation and potentially job performance. Furthermore, Rigopoulou et al. (2012) identified several role clarity elements that are critical for role success, however, retail store

managers who fail to employ these elements might fail to provide role clarity for first-line supervisors. The role clarity elements include (a) performance of daily activities, (b) management of lower-level employees and customers, (c) effective methods, techniques, and procedures for accomplishing job tasks and improving performance, and (d) financial and other performance objectives the first-line supervisor must achieve within a specific period (Rigopoulou et al., 2012). Additionally, a lack of knowledge sharing and knowledge management practices might inhibit first-line supervisor problem-solving skill development.

Retail store managers might fail to develop, enforce, or use knowledge management strategies and tools that could enhance first-line supervisor performance. Mehrabani and Mohamad (2015) identified knowledge sharing and knowledge management as critical skills for leaders and closely aligned with effective problem solving. Furthermore, Mehrabani and Mohamad (2015) noted knowledge management might improve performance through improved efficiency, productivity, quality, and innovation, as well as improved decision-making, process improvement, and data integration. Knowledge management and other potential impediments to retail store managers employing strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving underscores the rationale and potential business impact of this study.

Method

Study Participants

RetailCo is a pseudonym for a regional supermarket company with operations in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, that has been in business for over 60 years. The organization operates stores in the southeast United States. The company's purpose is to grow community and promote homegrown elements central to their branding strategy.

The participants for this study were four retail supermarket store managers in Winston-Salem who had experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills. We used a typical case purposeful sampling approach to select participants for this study. A purposeful sample of participants who have experience with the phenomenon under study is appropriate for an intensive case study (Bernard, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Robinson, 2014). Dworkin (2012) observed sample size is subject to wide variability in qualitative research studies. Research with a participant interview focus typically utilizes a sample size small enough to allow for individual voice within the study (Robinson, 2014). One method of justifying sample size is by precedent set in extant literature (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). The participants included one female, three males and averaged 4.2 years of experience in a store manager role.

Data saturation describes the point at which a researcher discerns continued data collection will supply minimal, if any, new information pertaining to a particular matter (Morse, Lowery, & Steury, 2014). Researchers seek to show data saturation as evidence of quality criteria related to sample adequacy (Marshall et al., 2013; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Trotter, 2012). The interview process continued until we concluded data saturation was achieved and documentation review was utilized to confirm completeness. In this study, we utilized data source triangulation to compare data gathered from multiple sources to determine data completeness, as well as confirmed that the sources provided a complete picture of the phenomena (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Research Method and Design

The central research question used to guide this study was this:

> *Research Question*: What strategies do retail supermarket managers use to improve first-line supervisors' problem solving abilities?

The interview questions used in the study were as follows:

> *Interview Question 1*: What strategies have you utilized to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities related to customer satisfaction?

> *Interview Question 2*: How did you implement the strategies?

> *Interview Question 3*: What barriers did you have to address in implementing the strategies?

> *Interview Question 4*: How did you address the barriers to implementing the strategies?

> *Interview Question 5*: How do you measure the strategies' efficacy (or effectiveness)?

> *Interview Question 6*: Please share additional information related to strategies store managers use to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills that will add value to this study?

A case study research design provided the opportunity to explore strategies used by participants to improve first-line supervisor's problem-solving abilities. A case study research design is suitable to examine a current and complex, real-life phenomenon, or bounded system, and employs multiple data collection sources to develop an extensive depiction and analysis of the case (Yin, 2014). The sampling method used was a typical case purposeful sampling approach. The qualitative research methods included conducting semistructured interviews (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012), review of company documentation related to store manager and first-line supervisor training, as well as annual goal setting and performance measurement templates (Yin, 2014), member checking interviews (Houghton et al., 2013), and reflexive journaling (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012) facilitated triangulation of data (Klonoski, 2013; Yin, 2014). We used MAXQDA (VERBI GmbH, n.d.) qualitative data analysis software to store, organize, sort, and aid in coding data. We analyzed the data utilizing Yin's (2014) five phases of qualitative data analysis and methodological triangulation with all sources of data contributing equally to the study results.

Study Results

The research findings were congruent with the purpose and significance of the study and related to the skills-based leadership model. The main themes that emerged, as presented in Table 1, addressed the central research question and played a critical role in helping to understand the research phenomenon. The first theme was the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors. The second theme pertained to coaching first-line supervisors on performance. The third theme related to first-line supervisor learning and development. The fourth and final theme related to measuring first-line supervisor performance.

Table 1. *Frequency of Themes*

Themes	n	Rate of Occurrence
Communicating expectations	103	43.46%
Performance coaching	63	26.58%
First-line supervisor learning and development	40	16.88%
Measuring performance	31	13.08%

This study has contributed to the understanding of strategies retail store managers need to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. According to Meuser et al. (2016), leadership event cycles might explain linkages between dynamic leadership processes and person-parts level of events as posited by Hoffman and Lord (2013). Furthermore, Hoffman and Lord (2013) asserted that developing proactive leadership skills in creating and responding to events is necessary to provide consistency, predictability, and structure for followers, and to also contribute to discerning a leader's impact on organizational performance. Therefore, when there are no strategies in place to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities, retail store managers may have a greater challenge in achieving customer satisfaction and better business results.

Theme 1: Communicating Expectations

The first theme that developed from the data was the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors. The participants' interview responses and company documents mentioned communicating expectations with first-line supervisors 103 times, representing 43.46% of all responses (see Table 1). These responses and documents showed strategies relating to store managers communicating expectations with first-line supervisors. Participant responses and company documentation such as store manager and first-line supervisor training guides showed the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors, including ensuring those expectations were cascaded to the first-line supervisor's subordinates. This finding aligned with the conceptual framework, in which Mumford et al. (2000) asserted that leaders implement effective problem solutions within a social context and should possess social performance skills, including communication. The importance of communicating expectations theme paralleled Steele and Plenty's (2015) statement that communication competence was critical for leaders. These findings also confirmed previous research by Janhonen and Lindström (2015). We identified several subthemes within the first main theme that current research corroborated. These subthemes related to communicating expectations were (a) communication, (b) accountability, (c) set and clarify expectations, (d) follow-up on expected performance, and (e) enable performance and handle mistakes.

Theme 2: Performance Coaching

The second main theme identified additional strategies utilized by store managers to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. Within this theme, participants discussed the importance of key factors in coaching first-line supervisors to improve performance. Participant interview responses and company documents mentioned first-line supervisor performance coaching 63 times, or 26.58% of all responses (See Table 1). Company documentation such as store manager job description, store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists, and participant responses, indicated the importance practicing performance coaching with first-line supervisors, personal reflection by the store manager, and reducing first-line supervisor role conflict. These findings

supported the conceptual framework, the skills-based leadership model (Mumford et al., 2000), in which Mumford et al. posited coaching as a social performance skill. The performance coaching theme aligned with the supporting body of literature related to the conceptual framework. Kim et al. (2013) found managerial coaching impacted work performance and role clarity that significantly affected employee attitudinal and behavioral responses. Chong, Yuen, Tan, Zarim, & Hamid (2016) concluded leadership development was the most critical element of managerial coaching.

The performance coaching theme was analogous to McCarthy and Milner's (2013) conclusions that regular managerial coaching might positively influence performance, work engagement, and learning. These findings confirmed previous coaching research by Kim et al. (2013), and McCarthy and Milner (2013). Subthemes identified within the second main theme through responses provided by all participants, as well as in RetailCo company documents and substantiated by extant literature. The subthemes included (a) coaching, (b) store manager personal involvement, and (c) reducing role conflict.

Theme 3: First-Line Supervisor Learning and Development

The third theme developed from the data was first-line supervisor learning and development. Within this theme, participants discussed the critical elements in first-line supervisor learning and development activities to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Participant interview responses and RetailCo company documents mentioned first-line supervisor learning and development 40 times, or 16.88% of all responses (see Table 1). Company documentation such as store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists, and participant responses, indicated the importance of first-line supervisor on-the-job (training) learning, completing mandated company training programs, as well as the importance of development and action planning. The first-line supervisor learning and development theme aligned with the supporting body of literature related to the conceptual framework. Findings within the first-line supervisor learning and development theme aligned and diverged from extant literature. Germain (2012) concluded some attributes of expertise are intrinsic and considered unteachable, however, skills, such as problem-solving, social judgment, and knowledge, can be acquired by the learner through training. Conversely, Zaccaro (2012) indicated individual leader attributes, such as motivation orientation, aid in explaining leadership effectiveness. Townsend (2013) concluded organizations and managers often neglected the first-line supervisor role development.

The first-line supervisor learning and development theme paralleled Townsend's (2013) conclusions that formal support and training were critical for first-line supervisor skill development. Townsend (2013) asserted that effective first-line supervisor training might include a training program coupled with managerial coaching. The findings from this theme confirmed previous research by Billett and Choy (2013), and Cohen (2013). Identified subthemes through interview responses included (a) on-the-job learning, (b) follow-through on company mandated training, and (c) development and action planning.

Theme 4: Measuring Performance

The fourth and final main theme that developed from the data was measuring first-line supervisor performance. In discussing this theme, participants identified strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities through measuring and reviewing first-line supervisors' performance. Furthermore, RetailCo annual goal setting template indicated the importance of identifying and establishing diverse performance goals and measurements for first-line supervisors.

Participant interview responses and RetailCo documents mentioned measuring performance 31 times, or 13.08% of all responses (see Table 1). The measuring performance theme aligned with the body of literature, RetailCo company documents, and related to the skills-based leadership model. Key constructs of the skills-based leadership model included demonstrated performance as a component of leadership outcomes (Mumford et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013). As previously noted, Bloom et al. (2012) indicated effective management performance and practices could positively improve organizational performance. Preenen et al. (2014) found effective management practices might include setting and executing goals, planning and scheduling activities, and developing subordinates.

The measuring performance theme paralleled Hoffman and Lord's (2013) conclusions suggesting the importance of analyzing leadership performance at an event-level to aid in understanding, in part, how leaders, such as first-line supervisors, acquire leadership skills. Responses provided by all participants, RetailCo company documents, and the body of literature aided in identifying subthemes within the fourth main theme. The subthemes included (a) identify performance measurements, (b) set performance goals, and (c) regularly review performance.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations describe what the reader can and cannot conclude from the findings of a research study based on potential weaknesses of the research method employed (Denscombe, 2013). This qualitative study was limited to a purposeful sample of four retail store managers in Winston-Salem. The first limitation was the possibility of not finding four retail store managers in Winston-Salem to participate in the study. The second limitation was the possibility of not obtaining consent of participants to participate in the study. The third limitation was the single-case study research design of this study, which limited the transferability of the findings.

The findings from this study warrant additional exploration of strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities as they apply to the broader topic of first-line supervisor leadership skills for which exists dearth literature (Townsend et al., 2016). Therefore, researchers should conduct further studies to explore and address limitations and delimitations. Because this study focused on four retail store managers from one company in Winston-Salem, we recommend expanding research to include broader geographical scope. We further recommend exploration of strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities with larger organizations, as well as examining variables identified within this study from a quantitative research worldview and perspective.

We also suggest conducting a study to expand examination of strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities through the lens of elements of the events taxonomy (Hoffman & Lord, 2013). Exploring strategies from events-level and person-parts perspectives might provide further elaboration of findings from this study. We further suggest conducting a study to investigate the financial impact of implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities on organizational profitability.

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to explore strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. We used a qualitative single-case study to understand the

phenomenon under study. The findings of the study show that organizational leaders can use the skills-based leadership model conceptual framework to enhance an organization's performance.

We developed interview questions and utilized an interview protocol to elicit responses from participants based on their experiences as retail supermarket store managers who had implemented strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The participants, purposefully selected from RetailCo's Winston-Salem area stores, had experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. We used MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software to store, organize, sort, and aid in coding data. During the analysis, we coded significant statements and established four themes that provided insight into strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities.

This research is meaningful to retail supermarket store managers in numerous ways. Townsend et al. (2016) concluded first-line supervisors encounter barriers and constraints in their roles related to dichotomous managerial and leadership accountabilities. The findings of this study are relative the skills-based leadership model and indicated leadership is a type of skilled performance (Mumford et al., 2000; Price, 2016). The implementation of strategies identified in the first main theme such as communicating and cascading expectations, holding first-line supervisors accountable, following up, and providing positive reinforcement, are leader communication competencies (Steele & Plenty, 2015). Having these strategies in place may assist retail supermarket store managers in improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities related to communication, accountability, setting and clarifying expectations, following-up on expected performance, and enabling first-line supervisor performance and handling mistakes.

Improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities requires strategies for coaching first-line supervisor in key factors. McCarthy and Milner (2013) concluded that regular managerial coaching might positively influence performance, work engagement, and learning. In the second main theme, utilizing a situational coaching approach adjusted to each first-line supervisor, as well as articulating a questioning approach to coaching that centered responsibility for problem-solving on the first-line supervisor were identified. Our findings supported the criticality of reducing first-line supervisor role conflict. Kim et al. (2013) concluded subordinates who received managerial coaching had a coherent role understanding and higher level of personal commitment. Store managers can implement myriad learning and development activities to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills. Longenecker and Yonker (2013) asserted that organizational leaders, such as store managers, should create development and action planning systems to aid in closing performance gaps of subordinate leaders, including first-line supervisors. Our findings pertaining to the measuring performance theme may aid in establishing a performance measurement and management system for first-line supervisors. Hoffman and Lord (2013) suggested the importance of analyzing leadership performance at an event-level to aid in understanding, in part, how leaders, such as first-line supervisors, acquire leadership skills.

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