

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN CUSTOMS DOMAIN

JEL Classification: H83, I21, I28

**MANAGEMENT SOFT SKILLS: RESULTS ORIENTED  
APPROACH**

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*Abstract*

*Management soft skills have been continuously underestimated by the state authorities, not establishing a proper balance between educational programs and practical application of acquired knowledge. There is a large variety of reasons behind, usually based on political, cultural, economical and social grounds. Some of them are relatively easy to tackle, others not at all, some need just basic knowledge, while others - deep and comprehensive understanding of psychology and extensive work experience. In this regard practical exercises combined with special environment better help to equip people with the required skills. In this article I present some of the most important findings and propositions to advocate more “practical” approach to the delivery of management soft skills. The conclusion is that the proposals can give a considerable contribution to the development of the discipline itself and to selected topics.*

*Keywords: management soft skills.*

**Introduction**

There are no borders for Management Soft Skills. They are universal and can be applied in the state sector or business environment all around the world. These skills (practiced abilities to act) are essential also for an effective administration of a modern customs organization. Due to its importance this message was incorporated in the European Union Customs Blueprints (Organization and Management) as one of the key indicators: “a management development programme, covering all of the key managerial skills and abilities identified by the administration”<sup>1</sup>.

Appropriate set of management soft skills is a considerable asset for every employee, starting from shift leader at a remote border crossing point and ending with a top level executive manager. There are no born managers. Being a true manager requires

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<sup>1</sup> “EU Customs Blueprints”, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2007, p.19, see also: [http://ec.europa.eu/taxation\\_customs/resources/documents/common/publications/info\\_docs/customs/customs\\_blueprint\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/resources/documents/common/publications/info_docs/customs/customs_blueprint_en.pdf)

application of certain skills that can be obtained only by means of learning and practicing. Basic knowledge of interpersonal relationships is provided by families, schools and social environment, when the grounds for developing of a personality are formed. After joining the working environment, further education is being performed by supervisors as “on the job training”, using different techniques, including coaching. The attention has been paid to this topic by the customs administrations or appropriate public administrative bodies such as the civil service. Training methods and tools have been developed by national universities to deliver appropriate knowledge to future customs officers. The International Network of Customs Universities (INCU)<sup>2</sup> in association with the World Customs Organisation (WCO) dedicates much effort to the elaboration and improvement of educational standards. This cooperation evolves in different educational products such as the Partnerships in Customs Academic Research and Development (PICARD)<sup>3</sup> Programme. There are also specific instruments available at the international level.

Through the WCO Capacity building programme, the organization conducted over 100 diagnostic missions of member Customs administrations. From these diagnostics, WCO identified emerging trends and patterns that reveal, among other issues, the need to further strengthen the capacity of individuals and organizations to manage strategically. Therefore, WCO created the Leadership and Management Development Workshop to empower senior management of the member states customs administrations.

Despite all these efforts, there are rare managers who observe the core principles of good managerial behavior in relation to all aspects of their daily duties. Not every manager is capable to do his primary task – to manage people. Why it happens and what could be done? The answer to these questions is not a simple one. But there are ways to impact the situation towards the improvement. This conclusion is based on a range of management theories supported by practical experience in delivering series of leadership and management skills development workshops under the umbrella of the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM)<sup>4</sup>. These workshops were provided mainly to customs and border guard low and middle level managers in Moldova and Ukraine in the period of 2010 - 2012.

Certainly, there are many issues a leadership and management skills workshop hardly can impact, namely the political influence on personnel, appointment of inappropriate people, lack of juridical support, deficit of clear, written and transparent policies and procedures, weaknesses in their application, and insufficient independent control mechanisms. As a consequence we often face abuse of managerial power, bad planning, disgusting behavior, and different other inappropriate effects. At the same time there is always someone curious around, someone willing to grow and to obtain new information, someone who is eager to create better working environment. This is the soil where to plant a seed of knowledge for the sake of a better future both for the customs and the country.

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<sup>2</sup> See: [www.incu.org](http://www.incu.org)

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.wcoomd.org/learning\\_customshome\\_valelearningoncustomsvaluation\\_cbpicardoverview.htm](http://www.wcoomd.org/learning_customshome_valelearningoncustomsvaluation_cbpicardoverview.htm)

<sup>4</sup> See: [www.eubam.org](http://www.eubam.org)

### 1. Management Soft Skills. What are we talking about?

To do any job properly, especially a managerial one, there are both hard and soft skills required.

Hard skills are technical, related to particular work and position, allowing an employee to do the job itself, such as computer literacy, administrative procedures (e.g. human resources administration, tax and accounting, safety and security) and business know-how (e.g. education or production process, client portfolio etc.). These skills are relatively easy to deliver and obtain, because mostly they are defined and measurable. This means also that their application is rather simple to monitor and evaluate.

Soft skills are behavioral and in contrary to the technical they are much more difficult to quantify and measure. This is why not only their teaching and learning is a challenge, but also observing and evaluation requires wide-ranging knowledge and experience. These skills are mostly universal and ensure people's ability to cope with each other not only in the working environment, but also at home.

Most common examples of universal soft skills are: active listening, communication, public speaking, working in team, providing feedback, goal setting, and conflict management.

In addition, there are skills which are of particular importance for managers due to the need to perform their core functions (planning, organizing, directing, and controlling). For instance, such skills as making decisions, managing time, managing meetings, negotiating, delivering presentations, coaching, motivating, teambuilding, and delegating are essential to perform effectively duties related to managing people.

Possession of all these and other skills and their application in practice allows leaders to perform at higher intellectual and emotional level, and ensures top managerial performance. This is a habit often called Emotional Intelligence. Of course, not one particular skill ensures high performance, and not all skills should necessarily be applied. The success factor is in the right combination of tools, tactics and strategies most suitable for particular person in his/her work environment. **According to Dr. Relly Nadler, if practicing on a regular basis just 10 of the 108 strategies (covered in his book), one would be heads above competition and miles closer to his goals<sup>5</sup>.**

Certainly, the list of above mentioned soft skills could be expanded or modified depending on other factors, such as the management level in question – low, middle or senior, and the type of organization – civil or military, public or private, of general nature or emergency, manufacturing or providing service etc. But the unifying factor is that the soft skills are personality habits and behaviors demonstrated when dealing with others. Therefore, the soft skills are very important for employees, but critical for managers.

### 2. Methodology and Content matters. To Whom, What and How to deliver?

#### 2.1. Preparation for the Workshop

There is one very basic rule for a facilitator to conduct the workshop: always take time to prepare even if you think you know it all. Failing doing so is a step to failure. Sure, there are many more rules, but the basic one never should be missed.

Another important step towards well prepared workshop is a careful planning of

<sup>5</sup>“Leading with Emotional Intelligence”, Reldan S.Nadler, New York, 2011, see also: [www.leadingwithiei.com](http://www.leadingwithiei.com)

each activity, considering where you are going to and what exactly you want to achieve with particular message or exercise. This is indeed a vital issue to ensure smooth flow of the event.

When considering the needs for a workshop in the management soft skills area, there are two basic groups of questions to be answered to prepare for the event.<sup>6</sup> The first is related to the person concerned, the second is linking it together with the subject:

- 1) Who is the candidate? What is his/her background and experience? In general - how well a human being is prepared to be a manager?
- 2) What is the course content? Does the course content address particular development needs of an individual? Do the expectations of both sides match together?

Ideally, every workshop should be individually tailored to fit the development needs of participants. In this case, the event itself would take place only when the preliminary needs and gaps analysis is conducted. This would require initial research, based on questionnaires and interviews. As a next step then would be the adjustment of the content. Some small home reading also is an option (but not a “must”) for participants to equalize the starting level and ensure common understanding on what is expected from the course.

Unfortunately, these activities were not possible in EUBAM’s case due to the time and budget constraints, therefore the preparatory phase included only two components.

The first one was drafting and offering the criteria for selection to customs and border guard services, leaving the choice entirely up to the responsible managers. This approach saved much of resources, but did not always ensure proper selection of candidates.

The second was putting together an agenda of a general nature, which covers most of the topics a normal one week event would comprise.<sup>7</sup> The idea behind the proposed agenda is to bring workshop participants as close as possible to the emotional intelligence competencies as proposed by Goleman, Boyatzis and Hay in their Group model.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, some of the topics were intentionally left outside of the workshop agenda due to their extent, but definitely worth of a separate seminar, e.g. conflict management and emotional self-control; others were combined in groups or included in wider themes.

After selecting potential topics, the initial idea was to dedicate an equal amount of time to every topic creating balanced agenda and satisfying the demand for a comprehensive workshop. Following a trial period, guided by collected feedback and own conclusions, the decision was made in favor of more dynamic approach. We as facilitators enjoyed even an excitement experimenting with certain tools. This resulted in slight modification of the agenda before every workshop, and sometimes even *ad hoc*. Indeed, one of the beauties of customized workshop vs. traditional educational program is exactly the possibility to adapt the content to current needs quickly and efficiently. This concerns not only the content, but also the method of delivery. In EUBAM’s case we chose the

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<sup>6</sup> This article does not cover organizational aspects of preparation for the workshop, thus the logistics issues are not described here. Nevertheless, this (along with the location and infrastructure) is an equally important component when creating a learning stimulating environment.

<sup>7</sup> See *Annex 1*: The list of leadership and management workshop topics

<sup>8</sup> See *Annex 2*: Emotional Intelligence Competencies

facilitation<sup>9</sup> as a main method, consisting mostly of brainstorming, discussions, tests, role plays, educational movies, and practical individual and group tasks, thus limiting lecturing and presentations to the extent necessary only to introduce the very basics of a topic.

Finally, there is one more conclusion rising from the content perspective. Sometimes participants were more interested in one topic in comparison to the other; therefore it appeared worth to be ready to expand on most attracting topics. In this case it is worth to have a spare set of exercises to be able to satisfy additional demand.

### 2.2. Delivery of the Content

Management soft skills are easier to educate from zero or strengthen existing ones, then to correct already established habits of an adult human being, since some of these habits may be considered as acceptable weaknesses. There are certain dangers involved in the correction of such weaknesses. In this regard an unconsidered correction of a weakness may have a damaging impact on people's strengths. Prof. Meredith Belbin elaborated this issue in relation to the team work and team roles.<sup>10</sup>

Another consideration should be dedicated to the fact that much of the learning in a workshop is meant to be amongst the participants, but not every individual agrees to open himself in front of the public. Therefore, we chose the facilitation as the core approach to conducting the workshops. In addition, we tried to stick to the coaching methods<sup>11</sup> as close as possible, since the coaching is meant specifically to improve managing and leadership abilities, and may be applied not only in formal one-to-one coaching sessions, but also, and even more effectively, within the team meetings and group facilitation. This methodology proved it's effectiveness and in most of the cases ensured participants arriving to own conclusions as regards their current abilities and development needs, consequently allowing open discussions on most of the topics, and sometimes even on sensitive private issues.

As regards the motivation of participants, besides their own factors and natural attitude, there are different tools facilitators can use to stimulate interest and contribution. Certainly, the list might be extremely extensive if ought to be complete. But the most effective and useful instruments used in EUBAM workshops were those creating a friendly and collaborative environment in combination with variety of attractive exercises, to the great extent available online.<sup>12</sup>

There are many issues to take care of when delivering a workshop, but one particular behavioral aspect should be highlighted certainly. Great part of success is related to the performance of facilitators, particularly the principle "leading by example". If facilitator is friendly, participants will act in the same way. If facilitator is addressing every person with respect, students will follow the same pattern. In other words, creating the environment of a workshop is a pure facilitator's business. Being open, honest and motivating always reaches the audience and pays back with the same value.

<sup>9</sup> "Facilitation 101", Edward S. (Ned) Ruete, Toronto, 2000, see also: <http://amauta-international.com/>

<sup>10</sup> "Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail", M. Belbin, Oxford, 2010, see also: [www.belbin.com](http://www.belbin.com)

<sup>11</sup> See definition and related comments: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coaching>

<sup>12</sup> See: [www.businessballs.com](http://www.businessballs.com)

Finally, there is also one organizational aspect to be mentioned related to the venue. As proved by the practice, it is considerably easier to create a relaxed and learning atmosphere outside the office. We experienced workshops both residential and in working environment. When comparing the impact we came to the conclusion that a place outside office is preferable and tried to organize these workshops residential as often as possible. This ensured an added value using of at least 3-4 evenings for the teambuilding sessions and practical tasks related to the subject. Even if the workshop evaluation rating in figures<sup>13</sup> did not demonstrate this so obviously, oral and written responses proved the correctness of this tactics and assisted to advocate this approach while planning further workshops.

### **3. Lessons learned. What are the issues of special importance?**

#### *3.1. Support at the top level*

Unfortunately, in the customs environment yet there are no regional or worldwide unified standards covering management soft skills in educational establishments and customs administrations. Therefore, the list of requirements varies from country to country and from customs to customs, impacted *inter alia* by the differences in structure, subordination and functions of organisations.

WCO is aware of this situation and has made a considerable effort towards improving the situation. There are several programs intended to build institutional capacity. The largest and most comprehensive one is The WCO Columbus Programme<sup>14</sup>. This Programme started in 2007 and in three phases is enabling customs administrations with diagnostic, implementation and monitoring tools to reach the world class level of performance. This concerns all organizational and administrative aspects, including management issues. The strategy of the Programme is based on six principles, all of them directly referring to the nation wide approach and requirement to raise customs modernization to the highest priority among the governmental programs. One of the principles directly recognizes the need for sustained high-level political will and commitment, while others speak about cooperation, resources, ownership of issues etc. Unfortunately, in the developing countries, while customs is one of the biggest income generators, governments tend to underestimate the importance of appropriate support. As a rule, they try to equalize the investment in this organisation with other civil service structures, thus undermining the development potential not only of customs itself but of all the state.

OSCE recognizes in its recent handbook of best practices at border crossings, that there still is a lack of emphasis on proper human resources management within customs/ border administrations<sup>15</sup>. It is evident that the management soft skills development is not a top priority issue also in customs services of Ukraine and Moldova. Customs management does not consider development of human resources as one of the key factors for their

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<sup>13</sup> See *Annex 3*: The rating obtained from EUBAM leadership and management workshop participants

<sup>14</sup> See: [www.wcoomd.org](http://www.wcoomd.org)

<sup>15</sup> "Handbook of Best Practices at Border Crossings – a Trade and Transport Facilitation Perspective", OSCE, Luxembourg, 2012, p.196, see also [www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org)

future success, therefore as an organisation it is still far from being acquainted with the full spectrum of all internationally recognized tools ensuring client and service orientation. Top managers still do not consider their management skills as an area for improvement, and ignore appropriate events in both countries. Management support to this topic still is not reaching expectations of customs officers and international donors.

Management attitude in state organisations in the post-soviet space has not reached the level where all important development issues are addressed at adequately high level. Often the strategic management is diluted with the micro managerial details and processes, and delegation of tasks from top to the bottom is far from EU standards and global trends (EU Customs Blueprints, WCO Programs). In such an environment lack of written and properly applied policies leave substantial space for manipulation with personnel and processes, and modern personnel assessment methods such as the 360 degree feedback<sup>16</sup> is just another dream for a better future.

### 3.2. Train the trainers approach

While working in the region, EUBAM often experienced lack of sustainability. During the past years it happened, that a donor organisation invests resources to improve certain area. International experts assist in developing new and modern policies and programs, but the implementation is left up to national administrations without proper financial, technical or human (intellectual) support. In this case further development of the task is endangered and does not leave permanent impact as it was initially planned. In other words, reinforcement programs are missing. One of the ways to ensure sustainability is so called train-the-trainers approach.

On the basis of experience in delivering leadership and management development workshops in 2010 - 2011, Customs and State Border Guard Academies of Ukraine supported by EUBAM produced a training manual.<sup>17</sup> This manual comprises mostly of materials used in EUBAM workshops and some part of the “baggage” of trainers from both universities. There is a general part describing the delivering methodology, and 18 sections covering main management soft skills topics. All sections include theoretical part and practical exercises. Ultimately the manual presents a universal handbook, which can be used by trainers of educational establishments to acquire and disseminate management soft skills in a unified manner. This is the first edition of this type in Ukraine state sector meant to support delivery of management soft skills with modern teaching techniques.

This is just one example of best practice in the management skills development area in the region, but not the last one. Future plans include train-the-trainers events and further cascading of knowledge according to the elaborated manual and methodology. This approach will contribute to ensuring higher quality education and sustainability in achieving common goal – building institutional capacity. Additional attention will be given to the elaboration and implementation of training strategies, policies and programs both at universities and customs service.

<sup>16</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/360-degree\\_feedback](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/360-degree_feedback)

<sup>17</sup> “Инструменты эффективного управления”, Научно-методическое пособие для проведения обучающего курса/Под. ред. В. Заложа, Б. Литовченко., Киев, ВАІТЕ, 2012

<sup>18</sup> “Customs Modernisation Handbook”, World Bank, 2005, p.31, see also: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)

### **Summary and concluding remarks**

As the World Bank recognized in the Customs Modernisation Handbook, an organization is only as good as its staff.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the need for investment in the human resources management should be never underestimated by the customs administration. At the same time, this is obvious, that one single measure will not lead to the improvement in such a complicated area. If a boss used to manage for years lead by a main rule “the boss is always right”, this will require change not only in the policies, but also in peoples mind set. “We-know-it-all-and-better” times are over and customs managers should be able to look around for different tools and approaches. To improve the situation there is a permanent need to pay attention to the growth of management skills, therefore, as stated in the EU Customs Blueprint on Organization and Management, a human resources development program needs to be elaborated and implemented, covering both the education and practice.

Traditionally universities educate young generation with main focus on high profile theory and delivery level without equipping them with practical development tools. Thus, an average graduate normally faces frustration when starting sailing in deep and dark waters of ‘real life’. The task to cook an experienced and effective professional/manager is left for an organization and line managers. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a system which would support further growth of managers within their working environment, based on appropriate educational and career development programs.

Once elaborated, the development programs need appropriate communication and agreement with internal and external clients, because miscommunication often leads to lack of acceptance both by the target audience and the government. Correct communication is essential due to the requirement of the draft policies/laws to be agreed with different other ministries. In addition, often parliamentary level involvement is needed due to the impact of development programs on the state budget. High level involvement also may be required due to the need of communicating and interpreting sources - international standards and best practice on the basis of which customs development policies were elaborated. Therefore, sometimes it is appropriate to involve international organisations in the discussion on the development needs, and to seek for additional strengthening of proposals to the political decision makers.

Established managers are not supposed to sit and wait for their retirement. Good managers need to change, because the world is changing and they have to follow the pattern. They need to change not because consultants say so, but because progress is possible only when people are outside their natural “comfort zone”, and when they feel it’s time to do something. There must be an internal need and will to change, being a driving force towards the progress. Many different modern instruments are available for managers, which will help to raise awareness and provide competitive advantage for their organisations. However, often to convince one to change is a considerable challenge, because getting out of the “comfort zone” is more difficult than to stay in it; change always associates with a fear to loose. The risk to fail always existed, but only those do not fail who do nothing. Good managers make mistakes, because they are brave to undertake the risks, and because they are human. Strong personalities are overcoming fear, they do and



win. We are the winners, aren't we? Winning strategies are not the same as those of the old days. It's time to go ahead for the new ones - the approaches oriented towards the results.

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*Annex 1*

The list of EUBAM leadership and management workshop topics

1	Leadership and Management
2	Management Styles
3	Handling Meetings
4	Active Listening
5	Effective Communication
6	Providing and Receiving Feedback
7	Motivation
8	Decision Making and Problem Solving
9	Delegation
10	Delivering Presentation
11	Negotiation Skills
12	Team Management
13	Time Management
14	Planning and Organization
15	Developing and Coaching Staff
16	Managing Change
17	Managing Integrity Threats

## SECTION 2 – PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN CUSTOMS DOMAIN

### Annex 2

#### Emotional Intelligence Competencies

##### PERSONAL

##### SOCIAL

<p><b><u>Self-Awareness</u></b>                  Emotional Self-Awareness                  Accurate Self-Assessment                  Self-Confidence</p>	<p><b><u>Social Awareness</u></b>                  Empathy                  Organizational Awareness                  Service Orientation</p>
<p><b><u>Self-Management</u></b>                  Emotional Self-Control                  Trustworthiness                  Conscientiousness                  Adaptability                  Achievement Orientation                  Initiative</p>	<p><b><u>Relationship Management</u></b>                  Influence                  Inspirational Leadership                  Developing Others                  Building Bonds                  Teamwork and Collaboration                  Conflict Management                  Communication                  Change Catalyst</p>

Cherniss and Goleman, 2001

### Annex 3

The rating\* obtained from EUBAM leadership and management workshop participants

Criteria	Residential	Working environment
Duration of the event	3,5	3,4
Extend of novelty	5,1	4,9
Usefulness	5,9	5,9
Meeting expectations	5,8	5,4
Total evaluation (incl. organisation)	5,9	5,7

\* The rating is an average figure in a range from one to six where:

1 – Least satisfactory

6 – Most satisfactory

Note. The rating does not reflect any oral and written comments received.