

# National Retail Research on **Support Leadership** Differences

Summary Findings Report



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MOHR Retail White Paper



National Retail Research on  
**Support Leadership**  
Differences

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## National Retail Research on **Support Leadership** Differences

# Overview

We initiated a research project to determine the extent to which the foundational principles, skills, and strategies that drive RSL's success might be used for management development specifically in support areas.

For the past 40 years, MOHR is a name recognized as the premier service provider of interpersonal skills training to the retail industry, nationally and internationally. During that time, we have completed extensive research with major retailers on a wide range of topics including the competencies and skills critical to effective leadership and negotiation. This research has influenced our thinking about leadership skill-building approaches, individual clients and their results, and even the training industry as a whole.

The development of our Retail Store Leadership (RSL) program launched in 2010—a program with which we have had significant success—was an out-growth of that very type of research. More than 10,000 retail store and assistant managers have participated in that program to date which continues to give us new insights about the validity of its content, design, and ongoing measurement.

This year several of our retail clients approached us. They had success using RSL to impact store leadership's ability to build relationships and generate improved sales and profitability. They wanted to use RSL as a basis for Distribution Center and Home Office support management training. We initiated a research project to determine the extent to which the foundational principles, skills, and strategies that drive RSL's success might be used for management development specifically in support areas. Positions would include Buyers, Managers, Directors and Vice-Presidents. >



## Overview cont'd

In the past several months, we have been given access to some of the top retail companies in the U.S. and Canada. For purposes of confidentiality, we are unable to reveal specific names. However the range of retail formats included specialty, luxury, off-price, discount and outlet. Current VPs, Directors, Buyers, DC Managers, AP Supervisors, Tax and Audit Managers, and many other retail support leaders were interviewed about their management challenges and how they handle the range of interpersonal situations they face on a daily basis.

This document summarizes our findings, major themes and their implications for leadership development of support managers. We share this information and insights freely so that retailers can understand and strengthen their approach to developing leaders within their support area ranks. ■

# Executive Summary

We have seen how the pace, dynamics, customer influence and competitive market forces all shape retail management in different ways....

There is a myth about management training approaches and developing leaders: All management is about getting things done through people so all management training programs can teach all managers how to do that. We have to acknowledge a bias right from the start for MOHR Retail.

We have seen how the pace, dynamics, customer influence and competitive market forces all shape retail management in different ways than general management training is able to address. Of course there are core ideas and concepts shared by all management—even globally. What we found out about support versus store management is another subset entirely.

We began by creating a list of questions as part of our field research protocol. The questions included but were not limited to:

- What are your responsibilities in the area?
- How are you evaluated during the year?
- Describe some of the more common leadership challenges you face and how you typically handle them?
- What training have you received as a manager?
- What has been missing from your development that would be helpful?

We primarily gathered information from support managers either via phone or in-person interviews. We were also able to observe some management training and gauge the reaction of the support managers' participation and issues. >

## Executive Summary cont'd

The next phase of the project was to evaluate what the key differences were between store and support management issues and the requisite skills each needed to be successful. Six major themes emerged from this review. All of them pointed to significant differences that mattered. These differences would eventually reshape our thinking on what content and learning approach are essential for support management training.

# 6

## major themes

emerged from the data...  
what differentiates  
Support Leadership  
from Store Managers

**Six major themes** emerged from the data. Here is what differentiates Support Leadership from Store Managers:

- Perform triple roles of "Do", "Manage" and "Influence"
- Develop technical skills more likely than interpersonal skills
- Have specialized roles and responsibilities which create silos
- Lead associates who often work independently
- Have broader exposure to wider range of people and teams
- Are successful as much for their leadership presence as their competence

# 1 THEME ONE: Triple Roles of *Do, Manage and Influence*

The implications of having triple roles to play and play them well begin to manifest in a support manager's challenge of juggling all three competently.

Support Managers are busy. And for good reason. Not only are many of them working managers (which means they have their own work to do in the department), they also oversee and are evaluated on their team's productivity while concurrently serving as a business partner and advisor to other support departments and the stores.

For example, while Buyers' or Category Managers' main focus may be the procurement and promotion of profitable merchandise buys, they also have supervisory responsibilities to develop and promote their teams of analysts, assistants, and/or associate buyers. In addition, they serve as business partners to others within the organization during discussions of IT implementations, new branding initiatives, store design, loyalty programs, or training efforts.

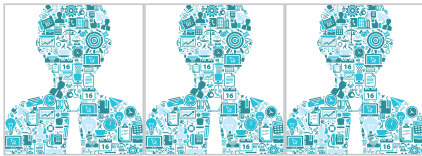
This paradigm of working manager (do), supervisor (manage), and business partner (influence) exists throughout the Distribution Center and Home Office environments. By comparison, the store environment relies on a manager's dual ability to focus on a range of operational responsibilities while supervising their team's ability to meet customer needs.

The implications of having triple roles to play and play them well begin to manifest in a support manager's challenge of juggling all three competently. Also, each of the roles has requisite skills and talents not completely aligned across all three roles. A working manager means they have to be very organized as well as job-centric competent. >

## 1 THEME ONE: Triple Roles of *Do, Manage and Influence* cont'd

The role of supervisor means being able to manage multiple types of learning and motivational needs, run meetings as well as set goals and provide constructive feedback to individuals.

Lastly, the business partner role requires that support managers have the necessary influencing skills to add value to discussions and be seen not just as an obstructionist but a specialist who understands the implications of company decisions. They also need to be able to present their ideas in a compelling way to others who may not agree or understand their department's processes or goals. ■



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## 2 THEMETWO: Development of technical skills more likely than interpersonal skills

Our research indicated that in fact, sometimes interpersonal skills training isn't done at all in support areas. Retailers often rely on the previous experience of the manager to have learned those skills.

Retailers commonly focus on and provide function-specific training that builds competencies well beyond the basics of new-hire training. Increasingly, competency-based training is an essential requirement rather than a "nice to have" option. Operating fork lifts, processing payroll reports, negotiating with vendors, or handling IT upgrades are examples of responsibilities that if not done well could bring the retailer's business to a halt. As a result, retailers are much more likely to have developed or purchased training on these job-specific tasks and closely monitor associate completion. Unlike the stores where sales and service training is frequently a priority, soft skills training in support areas is rarely given the same priority as the technical training that immediately impacts safety or the processing of entire shipments of merchandise.

There is a natural and important focus on the technical information needed to get a job done from the beginning. However, managing conflict, setting expectations, learning how to delegate effectively, give constructive feedback, or run cross-functional meetings is not the first training support managers receive. Our research indicated that in fact, sometimes interpersonal skills training isn't done at all in support areas. Retailers often rely on the previous experience of the manager to have learned those skills. And when critical skills training does occur, it often lacks the departmental tailoring to make the learning relevant, applicable, and as a result impactful to highly-differentiated support professionals. >

## 2 THEMETWO: Development of technical skills more likely than interpersonal skills cont'd

The implications are numerous, beginning with the impact on the Human Resources department which may find many support managers escalating performance issues rather than handling them on their own. Additionally, without specific interpersonal training support managers stay focused on the job at hand and may let issues relating to motivation slide by ignoring them. Given that support areas often have clear metrics, this may also lead to a 'one and done' conversation about performance versus taking a 'strengthening through coaching' approach by the manager. ■

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### 3 THEMETHREE: Specialized roles and responsibilities create silos

In order to maximize efficiency, retailers often intentionally narrow responsibilities in support areas.

Those who support the stores and a retailer's ultimate customer play very specific roles. As such, each department has unique operational and procedural policies and processes that they execute as they provide stores support. The support areas in the Distribution Center and the Home Office have well-defined positions and often have detailed expectations, some even legislated through laws at the state and federal level, about what their work is and how it is to be performed.

Organizationally retailers arrange offices and functional responsibilities into separate teams. It makes sense due to the narrow and deep approach that allows that department to become the specialist in a particular topic area. They know a lot about one major part of the business. As a result, retailers have to work harder and the individual within those functional silos too, to continue to be connected to other parts of the business. In order to maximize efficiency, retailers often intentionally narrow responsibilities in support areas. While this does create well-defined responsibilities with a much greater depth of skills, it also has a tendency to shape thinking into a 'black or white,' 'in policy or out of policy' approach. If you're trained on technical specifics and measured on technical specific outcomes your world naturally begins to look and feel siloed, separated from other departments with their own procedures.

Support areas and their managers are in a Supply Chain that can sometimes feel as though we receive something from elsewhere, do our part, and hand it off to the next cog in the wheel. >

### 3 THEMETHREE: Specialized roles and responsibilities create silos con't.

Retailers that recognize the importance of consciously working to connect support departments' roles to each other and the stores are more likely to build a culture of awareness of the whole. The implications of having these tightly-defined support departments for efficiency sake also means there is work to be done in helping them connect to others. This becomes particularly important when support managers work on cross-functional teams where individual perspectives of a situation can be quite different.

An additional implication is that it's the leadership skills and strategies that often help support managers understand how to improve their department's productivity by working more effectively with other departments within the Supply Chain. The manager's ability to articulate to their team why something comes in the way it does and what their department's options are for influencing or improving that situation are far more reliant on a support manager's interpersonal skills than job-specific knowledge. ■



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## 4 THEME FOUR: Lead associates who often work independently

There is an assumption in support areas that you know what to do and you just need to do it. This impacts how often a leader gives feedback.

A particularly fascinating difference between store and support leadership was how work actually was performed by individuals in support areas compared to a store. In a store, an associate's work is fairly visible to the manager. In fact, often stores conduct 'observations' in order to give feedback on a particular interaction with a customer. In merchant or support offices, managers may meet with their team or an individual to review priorities or new tasks, make the assignment, answer questions; and then everyone goes back to their cubicles or space and does their work. Support managers and merchants don't spend time watching their associates work. The manager is also going back to work and doesn't always play the role of just observer.

There is an assumption in support areas that you know what to do and you just need to do it. This impacts how often a leader gives feedback. When it is given it may not be close to the actual behavior. In support areas our research also showed a high degree of measurement on specific metrics. The process was often well defined with very specific steps that need to be followed. For example, how to double check an order for accuracy, using a work station PC or tablet that checks where you are in the process and get prompted for what's next.

This focus on outcomes versus process is different from store management where processes for building a relationship are much less defined, and where your personal style is allowed to be interjected. Feedback in store management is more frequent also because you can see and often watch what your associates do when working with customers or even putting out stock or creating visuals. People in stores learn by doing versus some of the technical/operational training discussed earlier for support areas. >

## 4 THEME FOUR: Lead associates who often work independently con't.

The leadership implication for support managers includes the need to be more conscious of regularly giving feedback on performance. There has to be extra effort to check in with associates and the team, and use skills to get information and input from associates in the support area so that they can be more connected and processes can be improved. Working managers in support areas need to get out of their offices so they can listen to phone conversations from time to time and provide valuable reinforcement to encourage effective behaviors and redirect less effective ones.

Since much of the measurement in support areas is focused on the outcome, i.e., what we did, such as got the trucks out on time or designed a store interior more welcoming to customers, it's also assumed that the process that 'got them there' works. This will limit innovation and improvement if the support manager doesn't review process as well as results on a regular basis. ■

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## 5 THEME FIVE: Broader exposure to a wider range of people and teams

Unlike technical skills that can be learned, applied, and refined rather quickly, the interpersonal skills that enable work to be done through others needs time and practice to develop.

Merchants and support leaders are more likely to either participate in or manage meetings with other peers and/or senior leaders to work through problems, develop strategies and/or challenge processes to improve innovation. The proverbial 'Fish Bowl' effect of working in or near the Home Office brings with it both good news and bad news. The good news is that you get exposure on a regular basis to the company's top executives as your functional expertise sheds light on tough challenges or as cross-functional teams generate innovative ideas. The bad news is that you get exposure on a regular basis to the company's top executives through impromptu hallway conversations, multiple meetings with peers and senior managers and talent review or calibration sessions.

Our research strongly indicates that DC and Home Office Managers need to develop the skills that give them the ability to give and get feedback constructively, influence others, and come to the table with a point of view. The communication skills required to effectively influence, sell an idea, or communicate upwards are much more sophisticated and require unique strategies specific to those types of interactions. And unlike technical skills that can be learned, applied, and refined rather quickly, the interpersonal skills that enable work to be done through others needs time and practice to develop. >

## 5 THEME FIVE: Broader exposure to a wider range of people and teams con't.

Managing interactions between all levels of the organization presents unique challenges. Here too, our research showed that a focus on technical skill development does not provide for the influencing skills required to get work done when one lacks direct authority—the ability to influence laterally with peers or ‘up’ with the boss and other senior managers including the CEO.

The overriding implication is that, unlike their store management peers who work every day in the public eye and are required to ‘sell’ or teach others how to develop strong relationships, support managers don’t always have the interpersonal skills to present ideas and resolve conflict. As a result, they are at a clear disadvantage. Their job puts them in a position where they interact with multiple levels of authority and they need to have more formal training that enables them to take advantage of the unique opportunities being in the ‘fish bowl’ provides. ■

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## 6 THEME SIX: Success is linked as much to a leader's presence as their competence

Every phone call or cross-functional meeting is an opportunity to make a favorable impression; or if handled ineffectively, can just as easily diminish a stellar reputation.

The 'fish bowl' effect discussed in Theme 5 also means that Distribution and Home Office managers are constantly being observed. Every phone call or cross-functional meeting is an opportunity to make a favorable impression; or if handled ineffectively, can just as easily diminish a stellar reputation. This level of observation means that merchants and support leaders were more likely to get feedback (but not always) from their supervisor. And the feedback was as often the result of something they didn't do or say as much as what they did contribute.

Merchant and support managers sometimes own the agenda of a meeting to which they are inviting either peers and/or more senior levels of authority. Being able to manage and influence individuals or whole departments who do not directly report to the meeting leader makes it particularly important that they have strong interpersonal skills and are managing to at least maintain, if not strengthen, their reputation through these meetings and communications.

There are also many times when merchants and support leaders are invited to meetings where they don't own the agenda but are expected to participate. Our research showed that managing these types of interactions well often emboldened a person's leadership presence. Their attendance was bigger than the meeting. Their ability to seize the moment or understand the timing of a question or comment could turn them from a mere participant to an insightful leader with a profound impact. >

Lessons around leadership presence were some of the most enduring and important lessons our research group had experienced.

## 6 THEME SIX: Success is linked as much to a leader's presence as their competence con't.

Competence in support areas appeared to be something that was a minimum requirement, not a ticket to the next level. Being able to participate in meetings, leverage quick hallway conversations, and ask just the right question that shows an understanding of a broader more strategic level for the company enhances the leader's presence. Together with competence this helped to move the individual into a more visible candidate for promotion within the organization.

The implication is that while you need to know how to do your job and must have consistent results from your work, those who were not able to differentiate themselves from their peers through their leadership presence could fall short in the eyes of those executives within ear-shot. Many participants in the research interviews could quickly relay stories from years ago of a decision they made in a meeting that continued to 'haunt' them. Only through increasing their competency while shoring up their reputation over time could they get back to a position of respect and be seen as someone with potential. Lessons around leadership presence were some of the most enduring and important lessons our research group had experienced. ■



# Summary

We started out with an assumption that much of the management training we had created for store managers would be very appropriate for their merchant and support counterparts. We were wrong. As it turns out, the situations, focus of work, levels of interaction and impact of work environment all reshaped our understanding of how complex and different a merchant and support leader's role is. It also clarified how much different the actual training would need to be in order to meet these unique and demanding situations.

We have developed a program based on this research that powerfully addresses each of these themes. The research project allowed us to move in another more productive direction for both content and design. We successfully uncovered our own myth about all management training being appropriate for all managers.



National Retail Research on  
**Support Leadership**  
Differences

# Appendix

Differences In <b>Support</b> and <b>Store</b> Leadership	
SUPPORT LEADERSHIP	STORE LEADERSHIP
Get the job done through <b>Functional Expertise</b> or Specialized Responsibilities	Get the job done through <b>Shared Responsibilities</b> or “Jack-of-all-Trades” – “Specialty of None”
Recipient of Function-specific/ <b>Technical Training</b>	Recipient of extensive <b>Leadership Training</b>
Principally executes <b>three roles</b> (working manager, supervisor, and business partner)	Principally executes <b>two roles</b> (merchandizer and supervisor)
Work is done through <b>cross-functional teams; heterogeneous workgroups</b>	Work is done within <b>homogeneous teams</b> (receiving, merchandising, MD’s, cashiers, etc.)
Exposure to a <b>broad range</b> of people and positions and levels of authority	More <b>narrow range</b> of exposure to people and positions
Focus on cost containment; being at or below budget; more control on expenses	Focus on exceeding sales budget; less formal control on decision-making around other expenses beyond payroll

<http://www.mohrretail.com/MSL>

