

Management skills of Afghan respondents: a comparison of technical, human and conceptual differences based on gender

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Abstract:

There are over thirty million people in Afghanistan with different skills and competencies. Due to immigration and educational opportunities, Afghan men and women are seen in management ranks of various industries across the globe. This study focused on the technical, human and conceptual skills of a selected number of respondents from Afghanistan to see if gender differences can be a factor in management competencies. The results of 202 respondents from Afghanistan show that these men and women have significantly different skills. Afghan men have significantly higher scores on the technical and human skills and women have a higher score on the conceptual skills. The scores of Afghans are compared with 100 American males. Americans seem to have higher scores on technical and human skills, while Afghan men demonstrate higher conceptual scores. Implications for educators, managers, and government officials are presented.

Key words: Management skills, gender, Afghans, dependency, education, and Afghanistan.

Introduction to Management

The modern workplace is diverse, filled with men and women professionals from every culture as there appears to be a convergence of some values due to the widespread existence of open and instantaneous communication through various genres in media (Mujtaba, Luk, Murphy, & Saowakul, 2009). Since each worker is different in respect to morals, values, and expectations, managers should provide a better understanding of their rules and policies along with diversity education for all their employees (Kaifi & Mujtaba, 2009, p. 13). “This necessity grows out of the relativity of values and the pluralization of society” (Cooper, 1998, p. 51). Modern managers and leaders must be effective having relevant technical, human, and conceptual skills based upon their rank in the leadership hierarchy. Consequently, this study focuses on understanding the management skills (technical, human, and conceptual) of Afghan respondents.

Organizations often seek effective managers who are able to use strategy as a medium to efficiently accomplish all goals because “the choices made by top management are influential on organizational outcomes” (Voges et al., 2009, p. 33). This could explain why “The primary mover of the organization is its strategy, which details its purpose and direction. Recent research has shown that organizational strategy influences the effectiveness of diversity in the organization” (Knouse, 2009, p. 348). For example, an effective manager must be able to promote innovation and determination as a part of the organization’s strategic plan. Knouse states that “a strategy of innovation requires rich perspectives and a diverse knowledge resource base for solving problems, such as new product development, product design, and customer service” (2009, p. 348). Managers must be able to use the talents of its employees to continuously innovate and reach new goals. One way this can be done is by having a diverse workforce who is able to learn from one another by synergizing and strategizing. As a matter of fact, “Using the talents and skills of individuals from other departments or organizations often leads to opportunities for cost reduction that might not otherwise be considered” (Pudlowski, 2009, p. 39). By strategizing, a manager will welcome viewpoints and perspectives that do not correlate with those of the organization. “From a practical standpoint, firms interested in exploring new knowledge boundaries and changing their capabilities should hire personnel whose knowledge is different from that already residing in the firms” (Tzabbar, 2009, p. 891). This concept will help with recruiting efforts because “diversity in background, values, and ideas would be valued by an innovative company” and “would attract prospective employees who expect to see a variety of people in organization” (Knouse, 2009, p. 348). Effective managers are needed to successfully manage diverse groups with different opinions, experiences, and talents. “Management is especially important when there are significant complementarities and spillovers between the actions of different individuals or groups” (Postrel, 2009, p. 273).

Management is usually defined as the achievement of organizational goals with and through people using available resources in the most efficient manner possible. Generally, people use the four functions of management which are planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (POLC) to achieve their organizational objective. *Planning* means defining an organization’s goals, establishing an overall strategy for achieving these goals, and developing comprehensive plans to integrate and coordinate activities. “Success at integrating the activities of the resources of the firm leads to higher operational capability”

(Postrel, 2009, p. 273). *Organizing* includes determining what tasks must be done, who will do them, how the tasks will be grouped, who will report to whom, and where decisions will be made. *Leading* includes motivating and directing employees, and communicating and resolving conflicts. *Controlling*, on the other hand, means monitoring performance, comparing results and goals, and making corrections and adjustments as needed in a timely manner.

Management Levels and Ranks

Management is divided into three levels: first-level supervisors (managers), middle managers and top management. The changing story in management today, of course, is that the layers and layers of middle managers that most large organizations used to have are giving way to self-empowered teams and flatter organizations. In their interpersonal, informational, and decisional roles, managers try to balance *efficiency* (how things get done) with *effectiveness* (what gets done) depending on the situation, tasks, and people involved (Mujtaba, 2007, pp. 36-37). *Efficiency*, or doing things right, is a measure of how well resources are used to achieve a goal. The key about efficiency is to be doing the right things right. *Effectiveness*, doing the right things, is a measure of the appropriateness of the goals chosen (are these the right goals) to get the firm to its destination, and the degree to which the stated goals are achieved (Jones & George, 2009). Effectiveness is concerned with selecting the right goals and making sure they are achieved. As a manager and leader, one must consider what might be the results of not being both efficient and effective in the department and/or organization. The success of a person and an organization is often determined through effective and efficient management. For example,

The processes relevant for public [or private] sector managers can be categorized according to the nature of the tasks and task environments involved: (1) processes handling the internal environment, such as planning, organizing, controlling, and decision making; (2) processes in relation to the external environment, such as policy process, collaboration, marketing, lobbying, and advocating; and (3) processes related to determination and measurement of public consultation and benchmarking, and evaluation. (Wu & He, 2009, p. 26)

If a manager or leader has a sense of purpose and direction, this will become contagious among his or her peers, colleagues and employees. Effective leaders tend to set high standards to meet and exceed the stated goals and objectives. Furthermore, effective leaders are honest and truthful; they look reality in the eye and face the facts, while strategically planning to move forward. Of course, the three basic skills that managers use are technical, human, and conceptual and that the proportion of one's time spent in these areas may change as managers go up the hierarchy (Katz, 1955). For example, senior managers may not spend as much time in technical functions as those who are in first line management. Top managers tend to spend more time using their conceptual skills. Top management has been found to be an important component in enacting an organization's vision and ultimately its performance (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Voges, Tworoger, & Bendixen, 2009). See Figure 1 in the Appendix.

In the article entitled, “Skills of an Effective Administrator” by Katz, at *Harvard Business Review*, the different skill requirements for different positions and responsibilities are presented visually, see Figure 1. As emphasized by most management scholars, research has shown that education and experience help managers acquire relevant managerial skills that let them perform their jobs effectively, especially conceptual, human, and technical. Authors Jones and George provide the following definitions for human, technical, and conceptual skills:

1. *Technical skills* are job-specific knowledge and techniques.
2. *Human skills* include the ability to understand, alter, lead, and control the behavior of people and groups.
3. *Conceptual skills* include the ability to analyze a situation and distinguish between cause and effect. Conceptual skills are often gained through formal education, reflection, and experience (Jones & George, 2009, pp. 17-18).

Modern managers of a cross-cultural workplace should be able to use relevant management skills if their organizations are to remain competitive. It should also be noted that promotion in management hierarchy is often linked to a manager’s ability to acquire the management skills and competencies that a particular company believes are important. The management skills needed are the same for women and men as research demonstrates that both genders are equally effective in leadership positions.

Afghanistan’s Culture: Men versus Women

Afghanistan is populated with over thirty million people with a majority being under the age of thirty. The culture of Afghanistan is a mix of history, Asian, Western, and Eastern traditions. Culture is a prominent factor in the differences people share, especially in the way men and women are socialized during a specific time in a given culture. In the case of Afghanistan, just as it is true of any other nation, “A variety of socioeconomic factors are responsible for women’s lower educational attainment, including direct costs, the need for female labor, low expected returns and social restrictions” (Ghosh et al., 2005, p. 196). Such differences can be critical in effectively managing workplace diversity. The culture of Afghanistan has traditionally emphasized hierarchy, paternalism, and mastery in contrast to egalitarianism, autonomy and harmony. In today’s competitive world, understanding and responding to culturally driven behaviors are paramount to succeeding in cross-cultural management and because “the people in an organization are crucial to its performance and the quality of work life within it” (Rainey, 2003, p. 219). The changes in the global economy have introduced new gender roles that have made organizations more diverse and full of managers with different managerial skills. Gender roles in all societies differ based upon traditions, economic status, and opportunities. In the Afghan culture and due to many years of violence and political conflicts, men have more opportunities for acquiring an education which has resulted in men dominating the workforce.

Buddhapriya (2009) states that although conflict between career and family roles in the modern workplace can be a potential source of stress for both women and men managers, it usually affects women more than men. Buddhapriya (2009) explains that

family responsibilities have hindered many women from entering the workforce. However, modern organizations tend to be more open to encouraging, recruiting, promoting, and retaining more women to higher levels of management, but they are usually complaining that the talent pool of qualified women candidates for the top level is somewhat limited. With globalization creating more opportunities, education for Afghan men and women has become more prevalent and a necessity the political leaders cannot and must not ignore.

The new generation of Afghan workers demands leaders and managers who have high humanistic attributes to help enhance morale and productivity levels so they can become independent of foreign resources. Thus, it becomes important to learn what dominant skills (technical, human, or conceptual) Afghan men and women bring to the workforce.

Study Methodology

The Style Inventory survey instrument provided by Peter G. Northouse (2010, pp. 64-65) was distributed to 400 English-speaking Afghans using Facebook as a social-networking instrument to get good participation. A total of 202 surveys were completed successfully by participants who live throughout the United States, Afghanistan and other countries. So a total of 202 responses, which represents a 51% response rate, were used for analysis. Of course, it should be mentioned that small population sample should be seen as a pilot study since it is based on a convenience sampling method which cannot be generalized to an entire population of over thirty million people who are diverse in term of their language, culture, and physical attributes. So the reader should see the generalized statements as simply referring to the specific respondents sampled and not necessarily the entire cultural patterns of the Afghan people.

The skills inventory is designed to measure three broad types of management skills: technical, human, and conceptual. One can score the questionnaire by adding the scores for each category. First, sum the responses on items 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, and 16. This is one's technical score. Second, sum the responses on items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, and 17. This is one's human skill score. Third, sum the responses on items 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18. This is one's conceptual score.

Many instruments have been used by different researchers to assess an individual's skills for management and leadership (Katz 1955; Rahman & Yang, 2009; Garman et al., 2006; Buttner et al., 1999; Egbu, 1999; Mumford et al., 2000). Instruments are designed to yield information about an individual's skills that can be used for training and development purposes. For example, Rahman and Yang (2009) explain:

One of the earliest surveys conducted to ascertain the skills required by senior logistics executives was performed by Murphy and Poist. In this survey they used three sets of skills: business skills, logistics skills and management skills. Business ethics was found to be the top-rated business skill, and personal integrity was found to be very important among management skills, whereas transport and traffic management was found to be the top-ranked logistics skill. (p. 141)

Regardless of the instrument, researchers understand the importance of managerial skills when planning, leading, organizing, and controlling. The research question for this

study is: *Do Afghan men and women have similar or different management skills?* For this survey, the higher the overall sum of the scores, the more likely that the participant is better at that skill. The research hypotheses for this study are as follows:

- *Hypothesis1* – Afghan men and women will have similar scores for technical skills.
- *Hypothesis2* – Afghan men and women will have similar scores for human skills.
- *Hypothesis3* – Afghan men and women will have similar scores for conceptual skills.
- *Hypothesis4* – Afghan respondents will have similar scores for technical and conceptual skills.
- *Hypothesis5* – Afghan respondents will have similar scores for human and conceptual skills.
- *Hypothesis6* – Afghan respondents will have similar scores for human and technical skills.
- *Hypothesis7* – Afghan men respondents will have similar scores for conceptual, human and technical skills as their American male counterparts.

The average age range for the Afghans in this study is between the range of 26-30, a majority are young and possibly college students or recent graduates. These respondents are of course familiar with cyberspace technology and feel comfortable filling out online questionnaires. It is very possible that these respondents are employed in positions that require them to be online on a daily basis. When comparing education levels in this study, 18 Afghans have completed high school (8.9%), 86 have a bachelors degree (43%), and 14 have a master's degree (6.9%). The industry that these participants worked in vary, for example, there were 34 Afghans that worked in education (16.8%), 32 that worked in government (15.8%), 24 in a private sector (11.8%), 94 in retail (46.5%), and 20 in the healthcare industry (9.9%).

Results

The results demonstrate that the Afghans in this sample have low scores on technical skills, followed by high human and conceptual skills. Afghan females responding to this study seem to have high scores on conceptual skills that allow them to effectively work with others at all levels. The first hypothesis, “Afghan men and women will have similar scores for technical skills” cannot be supported as Afghan men have a significantly higher score ($t = -7.14$; $p\text{-value} < 0.001$) for technical skills. Therefore, the first hypothesis is rejected. See Table 1 in the Appendix.

The second hypothesis, “Afghan men and women will have similar scores for human skills,” cannot be supported as men have a significantly higher score on human skills. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

The third hypothesis, “Afghan men and women will have similar scores for conceptual skills,” cannot be supported as women have a significantly higher score. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

The fourth hypothesis, as can be seen from Table 2, “Afghan respondents will have similar scores for technical and conceptual skills,” cannot be supported as they have a significantly

higher score for the conceptual skill. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. See Table 21 in the Appendix.

The fifth hypothesis, as can be seen from Table 3, “Afghan respondents will have similar scores for human and conceptual skills,” cannot be supported as they have a significantly higher score for the human skill. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. See Table 3 in the Appendix.

The sixth hypothesis, as can be seen from Table 4, “Afghan respondents will have similar scores for human and technical skills,” cannot be supported as they have a significantly higher score for the human skill. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. See Table 4 in the Appendix.

The last hypothesis, as can be seen from Table 5, “Afghan men respondents will have similar scores for conceptual, human and technical skills as their American male counterparts” cannot be supported as Afghan and American men have significantly different management scores. Afghan men surveyed in this study demonstrate a statistically significant higher conceptual score, while American men respondents have statistically higher technical and human skills. See Table 5 in the Appendix.

It is not a surprise that American men have higher technical skills since they often attend better technologically-equipped schools and higher educational facilities. However, what appears to be a surprise is that Afghan men have a significantly higher conceptual score. As stated before, conceptual skills can include the ability to analyze different situations and distinguish between cause and effect in each based on relevant variables. Researchers state that conceptual skills can be gained through formal education, reflection, and experience. While Afghans do reflect and have sufficient experience about the cause and effect circumstances, they can use more education to enhance their technical skills.

Pragmatic Implications and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that Afghan participants in this research scored highest on the human skills, followed by conceptual skills and had a very low score on the technical skills. Compared to females, Afghan men surveyed in this research have significantly higher scores on technical and human skills, but women have a significantly higher score on the conceptual skills. Men often work outside of the house at a younger age than women in Afghanistan and this might explain the higher technical scores for men. However, while the technical scores of men are higher than women, their conceptual skills are lower than their female counterparts. On the other side, while the technical scores of women are lower than men their conceptual skills are significantly higher than their male counterparts. Overall, Afghans have their highest combined score in the human area and can best serve as effective leaders and managers in middle to top ranks of the workplace. Studies show that:

Afghan respondents from a high-context culture of Afghanistan are more relationship-orientated. Interestingly, their task orientation score is also in the moderately high range. Therefore, managers and supervisors should feel comfortable in knowing that Afghan employees will complete the task at hand in a timely manner while maintaining a healthy relationship with their colleagues, peers, customers, and superiors. (Mujtaba & Kaifi, 2008, p. 120)

A different researcher explains, "Given that the Afghan community has been largely illiterate, the relationship between parents and school administrators and teachers was a delicate one" and further states, "The schools generally requested help from students' fathers for renovations and improvements to classrooms and schools, which accorded with traditional gender roles and expertise" (Hoodfar, 2007, p. 280). Afghans, who have high human skills can be the most promising managers in organizations because of their innate abilities to assist, nurture, and strategize. As a matter of fact, Afghan leaders and managers from all professions have started emerging (Kaifi, 2009, p. 7-8).

Afghan educators and government officials must promote education throughout Afghanistan because the majority of the Afghan people have been deprived of the most fundamental necessity for a civil society to progress. "The post 1929 laissez-faire mentality towards education has haunted the Afghan people for decades and has resulted in a life-long dependency on foreigners who have always had their own hidden agendas of strategically occupying the region" (Kaifi, 2008, p. 17; Kaifi, Mujtaba, & Xie, 2009). Dependency can be best converted into sustainable development through equal and speedy education of all citizens of a country. Equal and public access to a speedy education can help avoid the disparity between the upper and lower classes. "Dependence" must be converted to "independence" and then to "interdependent relationships" globally; in this way, Afghanistan can benefit from certain comparative advantages which are afforded to it through its natural resources.

Interdependency is part of the journey toward the ultimate goal of living interdependently with the global community. However, over-emphasizing nationalism, culture, and historical literature can certainly lead people of a society to desire absolute independence from the global community. This, however, is not a long-term solution in today's interconnected global community.

In research studies by Mujtaba (2007), the "independent" value was ranked as one of the top five by Afghan professionals. This should be evaluated in how it impacts behavior positively and negatively and the implications involved. The term "Afghan" stands for love, courage, devotion, dignity, commitment, loyalty, and the desire to make sacrifices for one's country and people. Mujtaba (2007) mentions that Afghans have long been committed to being free of outsiders' influence at all costs. This type of patriotism and conditioning towards independence has been weaved into the culture. Afghans need to realize that interdependency is not the solution to all of the country's challenges, and today's environment requires "interdependent" global relationships with other countries and allies. As a matter of fact, Afghans' desire to live independently is ironically what led to the country's eventual dependence on foreign countries, or donors. This has been the case since the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union (Russians) (Mujtaba, 2007b). Today's economic productivity and work environment are dependent on an "open system" where people can receive resources from anywhere worldwide and sell them globally, rather than functioning in a "closed system" which requires interdependency on all fronts. Overall, dependence is especially harmful when the nation is forced to rely upon less-developed countries. "Dependence" must be converted to "independence" and then to "interdependent relationships" globally.

Unfortunately, the continuous conditioning of "independence" can also lead to ethnocentricity, as well as xenophobic thinking and paradigms. This "surface level" mentality can negatively impact a country who is receiving international assistance in the

rebuilding process. High illiteracy rates (70-80% in Afghanistan) in the country may be causing this mentality since some individuals cannot perform proper cause and effect analysis due to the lack of education or current knowledge on inductive and deductive reasoning. It appears that the current Afghan government is encouraging capacity building by making literacy a top priority while building the workforce's capacity for more effective and ethical decision-making (Mujtaba, 2007d).

High literacy rates, continuous education, vocational training, and equipping the workforce with the right skills to become industrialized are critical elements to Afghanistan's progressive development and growth (Mujtaba, 2007, 2007b). Such workforce training efforts can accelerate economic development and reduce Afghanistan's heavy dependence on foreign aid. These initiatives also require effective and strategic management. Since no two situations are likely to be similar in all variables, it is best to apply effective management and situational leadership skills (Mujtaba, 2007c).

The new generation of Afghans should have ample access to technological advancements that are used in modern day organizations. Mainly, due to low technical scores documented in this study, computers should be available to all students and at all levels of academia. The curriculum used for education should become standardized throughout Afghanistan with computer literacy playing a major role in the curriculum. The government can also take an active role by offering *pro-bono* computer literacy courses and English speaking courses to the general public to help develop the technical skills of the Afghan people. Notwithstanding, the security and stability of the country are prerequisites for such actions to take place.

Afghan elders and war veterans should encourage the youth to seek knowledge and to become more competitive both locally and globally. However, there might be cases when Afghan elders, as effective situational leaders, may have to humbly and voluntarily step aside to let the most knowledgeable person lead. Educational qualifications and relevant experience should be the criteria for choosing who will be best suited to make the people, the department, and the country of Afghanistan more economically competitive (Mujtaba, 2005a & 2007b).

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this study and one is the limited amount of responses from each group. This survey can be combined with other more comprehensive instruments to enhance and confirm the results. Future studies can duplicate the research with a greater number of Afghan participants that are compared to other ethnicities. The fact that this study was conducted with a convenient sample population living in urban areas and expatriate Afghans living outside of Afghanistan was a further limitation. Future studies might control this variable by expanding the research population to include more respondents from various locations and provinces within Afghanistan. Perhaps different population groups and people working in various industries can be studied separately to see if culture is truly a factor in the management skills of women (and men) professionals. Finally, future researchers should consider translating the survey instrument into Farsi (Dari), Pashto, Nuristani, Uzbeki, and other local languages so as to facilitate the test subjects' preferred and dominant reading skills. Future researchers should also consider the following research questions:

1. *What social, political, and/or economical factors have influenced Afghans to develop their human skills?*
2. *What strategies can be used for the Afghan people to develop their technical skills in the 21st century?*
3. *What management role could Afghan expatriates play in the development process of Afghanistan?*
4. *What can managerial and governmental leaders do to reduce and eliminate corruption while creating a highly ethical work environment?*

Conclusion

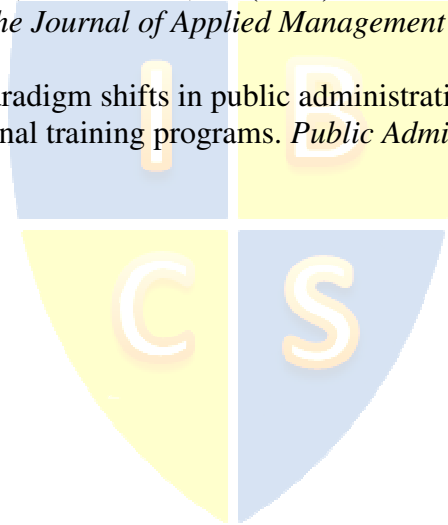
As Afghans become more independent, they will need to gain various managerial skills in order to efficiently run their government offices and private organizations. This study focused on the technical, human and conceptual skills of technologically savvy professional men and women respondents from Afghanistan. The results show that the Afghans sampled in this study have higher scores on human and conceptual skills. The educational institutions in Afghanistan need to focus more on teaching technical skills. Furthermore, Afghan women in this sample scored significantly higher on the conceptual skills compared to their male colleagues. Afghan women are able to lead and manage in higher levels of the hierarchy, perhaps this is due to their higher levels of emotional intelligence. Managers with high emotional intelligence (EI) levels are needed in organizations to train, develop and empower Afghan workers for various technical and management positions. Afghan leaders and government officials should have formal succession planning and development programs to enable and integrate more women into higher management and leadership ranks.

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Appendix

Figure 1 - Management Ranks and Skills (Katz, 1955)

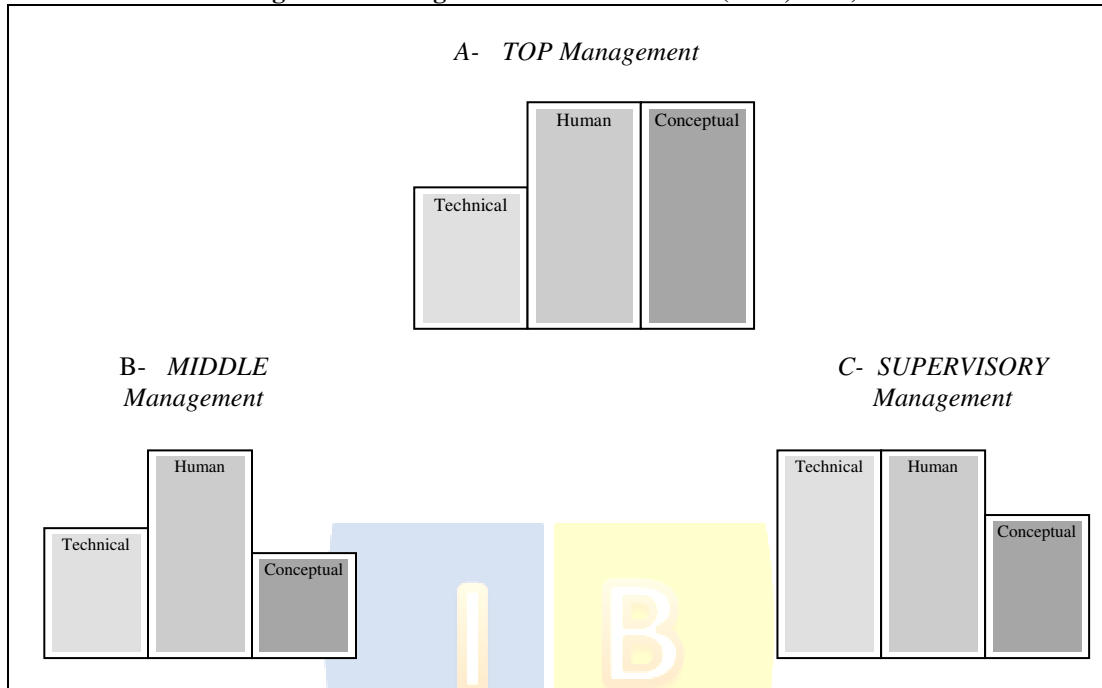


Table 1 – Afghan Men and Women Management Skill Scores (St. Deviations)

| | Number | Technical | Human | Conceptual |
|--------------|--------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Afghan Women | 102 | 11.61 (2.01)* | 26.92 (1.58)* | 27.99 (1.19)* |
| Afghan Men | 100 | 13.97 (2.65)* | 28.08 (1.29)* | 24.51 (2.72)* |
| TOTAL | 202 | 12.78 (2.62) | 27.50 (1.55) | 26.27 (2.72) |
| | | *t= -7.14; p<0.001 | *t = -5.71; p<0.001 | *t = 11.82; p<0.001 |

Table 2 - Afghan Technical vs. Conceptual Skills

| | Sample Size | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|------------|-------------|-------|--------------------|
| Conceptual | 202 | 26.27 | 2.72 |
| Technical | 202 | 12.78 | 2.62 |

t = 49.84; p<0.001

Table 3 - Afghan Human vs. Conceptual Skills

| | Sample Size | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|------------|-------------|-------|--------------------|
| Conceptual | 202 | 26.27 | 2.72 |
| Human | 202 | 27.50 | 1.55 |

t = -5.58; p<0.001

Table 4 - Afghan Human vs. Technical Skills

| | Sample Size | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-----------|-------------|-------|--------------------|
| Technical | 202 | 12.78 | 2.62 |
| Human | 202 | 27.50 | 1.55 |

t = -68.73; *p*<0.001

Table 5 – Afghan and American Men Management Skill Scores (St. Deviations)

| | Number | Technical | Human | Conceptual |
|--------------|--------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Afghan Men | 100 | 13.97 (2.65)* | 28.08 (1.29)* | 24.51 (2.72)* |
| American Men | 100 | 17.41 (1.39)* | 29.08 (1.08)* | 12.96 (1.45)* |
| | | * <i>t</i> = 11.50; <i>p</i> <0.001 | * <i>t</i> = 5.94; <i>p</i> <0.001 | * <i>t</i> = -37.47; <i>p</i> <0.001 |

