

DNA OF A SUCCESSFUL FACILITIES MANAGER

A non-scientific experiment

Briefing paper



Produced by

BIFM
PEOPLE
MANAGEMENT
SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

Supported by



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About the BIFM



The British Institute of Facilities Management (BIFM) is the professional body for facilities management (FM). Founded in 1993, the Institute promotes excellence in facilities management for the benefit of practitioners, the economy and society. BIFM supports and represents over 13,800 members around the world, both individual FM professionals and organisations, and thousands more through qualifications and training.

About the BIFM People Management SIG



The BIFM People Management Special Interest Group (SIG) was formed in 2009 to represent the interests of anyone involved in managing people in the facilities management sector. The group's mission is to ensure that people considerations are built into the fabric of the corporate decision-making process in the FM industry at every level, in the same way that financial implications are routinely taken into account today.

As a sector that is reliant upon its people to add value to its clients, facilities management is heavily influenced by effective people management, and the People Management SIG is keen to reflect it in its output, whether it relates to recruitment and selection, performance management, HR strategy, operational issues such as pensions administration, leadership, learning and development, employment relations, and much more...

If you would like to find out more, or to get involved in the SIG, please do get in touch.

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1. Introduction

On 27 November 2013 the BIFM People Management Special Interest Group organised an evening seminar focused on what makes a really good facilities manager. The event was held at Heron Tower, supported by Incentive FM, Catch 22 and Workplace Law.

The question – what makes a really good facilities manager? – may sound a little facile. It ultimately comes down to a definition of ‘really good’, and even then is dependent upon other people’s opinions.

The aim of the SIG event wasn’t to try and be too prescriptive, but instead to have some fun, share experiences, and try and gain some genuine insight to help people recruit, develop and – just as importantly – inspire talent in the FM profession.

The definition of ‘success’ was neatly provided in the form of no fewer than nine of the winners of the BIFM Facilities Manager of the Year Award, stretching back to the first winner (Anne Hart) in 2001. Having so many winners in the room at the same time (of the 13 in total) proved a great opportunity – not just for the audience to interact with them, but also for the current and past winners themselves to catch up with each other and swap stories.

It also provided a useful platform to compare their skills, attributes and attitudes, to try and solicit some common themes and, ultimately, hunt for that all-elusive DNA of a successful Facilities Manager.

The event was a huge success, and the aim of this briefing is to summarise the outcomes from the evening and to inform further debate.

2. The participants

The committee of the BIFM People Management SIG would like to thank the nine BIFM Facilities Manager of the Year winners pictured below for attending the event.



Winners (l-r): Andy Ratcliffe (2009), Dave Richards (2003), Deborah Rowland (2013), Pauline Ledford (2005), Trisha Stanley (2008), Anne Hart (2001), Julie Kortens (2010), Ian Broadbent (2006), Andy Kelly (2007)

It was tremendous to have so many of them in the room at the same event.

Our best wishes went out to the past winners who were not able to join us on the evening: Trevor Payne (2002); Caroline Finnegan (2004); Chris Stoddart (2011); and Wendy Cuthbert (2012).

3. The contention

The concept of the event – to search for the DNA of a successful facilities manager – was based on the view that the elements that make up such formative matter are not readily observable or widely understood. The contention behind this is that, while there is a great deal of readily available information out there to describe what a successful facilities manager may look like, and what competencies they may have, much less attention has been paid to their attitudes and behaviours.

4. Definition of a successful FM

Using the judging criteria for the BIFM Facilities Manager of the Year as a benchmark for defining success provides a useful starting point.

The BIFM Awards 2013 brochure states:

We will be looking for an exceptional individual, passionate and driven by customer service. The winner will be a role model, an exemplar of cutting edge service delivery and will already have achieved notable success in their career and their involvement in the wider FM profession.

The judges were looking in particular for evidence of:

- Innovative use of FM methodologies.
- How they create dynamic solutions.
- How they integrate FM into the organisation's strategic influencing and decision-making process and senior corporate structure.
- Operational and budget accountability.

Interestingly, the judges were also looking for evidence of academic progression.

While the detailed judging criteria will be sure to have changed over the 13 years since the award was first launched, it's a fair assumption that the 2013 guidelines will have broadly applied through the history of the award.

A quick review of the winners of the award allowed some immediate conclusions to be drawn about the DNA they did *not* have in common.

- Gender is not a determining factor: of the 13 winners, six are men and seven, women.
- Most, but not all, were working in the private sector when they won the award, but many of them also have had experience in both sectors.
- How they got into the industry seems to have played even less a part. Among those present on the evening, one started out as a sheep-dung collector, one a parking ticket administrator, one a dresser at a regional theatre, and two more starting out as paper boys.

Clearly, we needed to delve a little deeper.

5. Competencies

Before spending time in discussion with the award winners, we took a few moments to review the most commonly recognised attributes of a successful facilities manager that are accepted industry-wide.

We did this by looking at competencies. These are described by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development as follows:

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'Competency' and 'competencies' are typically used to define the behaviours that an employer values and believes will help achieve its long-term goals. They are a signal from the organisation to the individual of the expected areas and levels of performance and can be understood to represent the language of performance in the organisation.

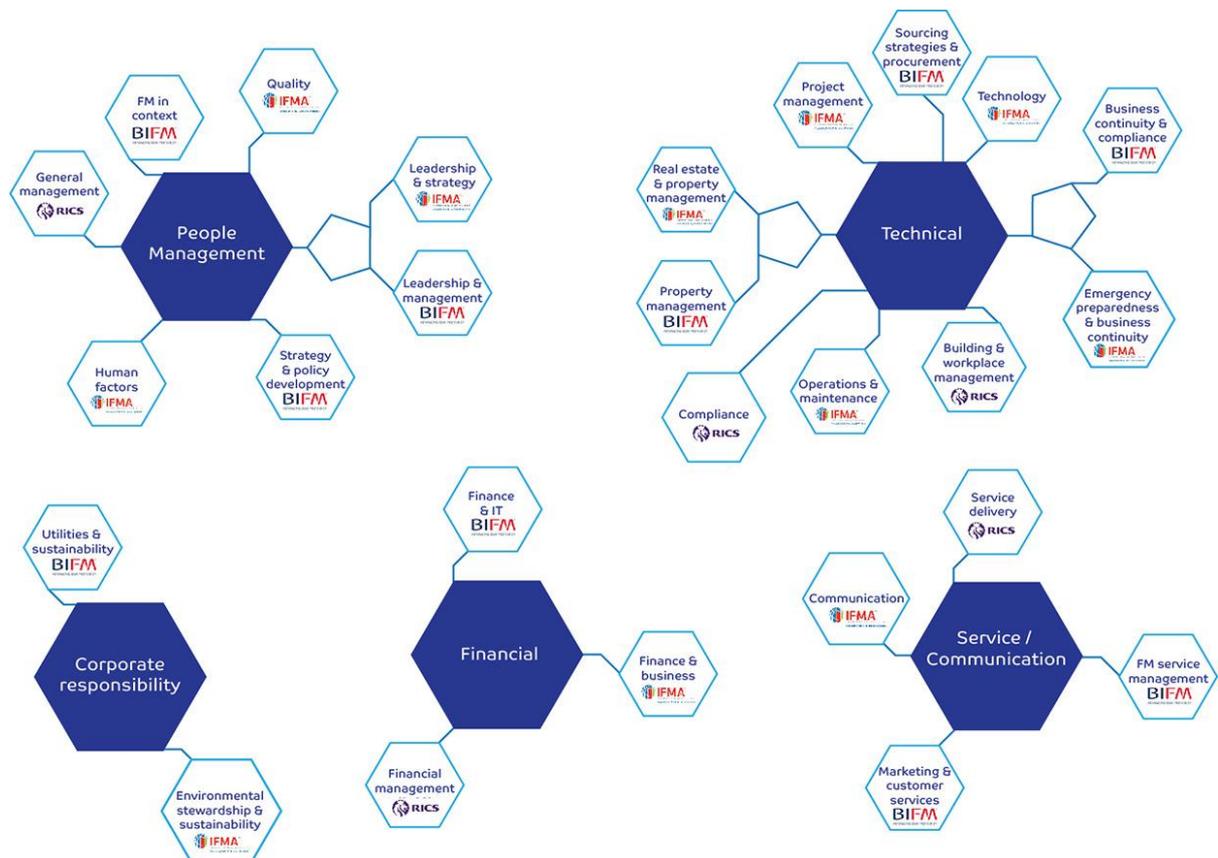
Competencies fall generally into two categories: behavioural and technical. Whilst originally more focused on the softer skills, this has increasingly become broader and more ambitious to include more technical competencies most likely due to the greater momentum by advances in technology.

Competency frameworks are used by many employers to identify and develop talent – indeed, according to research carried out by Workplace Law for ThinkFM 2013, 77% of high performing clients, and 86% of high performing service providers, use a competency framework to do so.

At the event, we looked at the plethora of overlapping phrases used by three established facilities management bodies to describe the competencies required of a facilities manager. The competencies we cited were taken from BIFM, RICS, and the International Facilities Management Association (IFMA).

The information is current and well informed. BIFM is reviewing its competency framework; guidance from RICS has been freshly produced as part of its Strategic FM Guidance Note (first edition); and IFMA is in the process of reviewing its competency framework to update the Global Task Analysis exercise it undertook in 2009.

The graphic below summarises the various competencies under five broad headings for easy reading.



What is important about the competencies is that, while in many cases they relate to skills and experiences, they largely describe behaviours: the things that people *do*. So for example, FMs should be competent to manage business continuity, inform strategy, and manage service levels, and so on.

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The ability to deliver against these competencies provides a measure of what it takes to be a successful facilities manager, but competencies don't necessarily tell the full picture.

We therefore wanted to use the time on the night to look beyond the expected behaviours of a successful FM. To focus less on what they do, and more on what they *are*.

6. Attitudes

To delve deeper into the DNA of a successful facilities manager, we facilitated a discussion among the audience, with each of our nine award-winning FMs hosting a table to consider the attitudes and behaviours that made them tick. We then collated all of the responses from each of the nine tables into a long list – the 52 separate items (some identifying the same thing by a different name) is produced as an appendix.

We then highlighted some of the more interesting and insightful ones for further discussion with the audience and the past award winners. We paid particular attention to attitudes as opposed to competencies, and were looking for any characteristics that either appeared to strike a chord with – or appear at odds with – the views of the award-winners present.

Confidence

A key theme that unites many of the characteristics that were identified was that of confidence. All of the winners agreed that they felt they had the confidence to do the job well – something more than just a sum of all the competencies they had. There was a strong sense of self-belief that was borne largely out of experience – which almost by definition implies that an important piece of the DNA of a successful facilities manager is something that is not attainable to an industry newcomer: time served on the job. This is likely to be an uncomfortable assertion to those in the HR sector, where age is not necessarily considered an essential factor in competence (and which also brings risks of discrimination). But it is a reflection of opinion on the night.

No one suggested for one minute that time-served alone would qualify someone to be good at their job – and there wasn't time to discuss the contribution that training and education played in gaining this experience – but all agreed it was an essential element. In fact, many of the behaviours that were identified as being important actually flow from having confidence: being unflappable; understanding people; leading a team, and so on.

Personality type

There was an interesting discussion around whether or not a successful facilities manager should be a 'control freak' or not, a term that jarred with many in the room. There were certainly elements of 'control freakery' in some of the characteristics we identified, such as the need to set high standards, the ability to show resilience and to challenge the status quo. But these were tempered by softer skills such as good judgement, understanding the audience, and what was described as 'taking people on a journey'. Ultimately, we suspect the 'control' element of the phrase was regarded as good, the 'freak' part less so!

This then led the discussion into a question over whether a certain personality type was important. One of the suggested characteristics from the audience was that a successful FM needed to be 'no shrinking violet'. We asked the nine award-winning FMs to identify themselves as either extroverts (there were six), or introverts (three). Ultimately, while there was a strong sense that communications and networking skills were important, the conclusion we reached is that these skills can be implemented in many ways, and you don't necessarily need to be outgoing to be a successful FM (though it may possibly help you to win an award as a successful FM!).

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Attitude to risk

Listening to some of the panel's answers made us think about another characteristic that had not in fact been mentioned during the workshop session; namely, the panel's attitude to risk. Without exception, all of the award winners described instances where they had made decisions that would have left them exposed in the event of failure. In some cases, these were difficult situations where they had backed themselves to succeed. In others, they referred to putting their faith in untested members of their team to deliver against sometimes demanding targets.

This led to them being described as 'risk takers'. Some agreed with this description, though the far-from-pedantic point was also made that use of the phrase 'risk' may also be misleading in a sector where risk management is so important. But the sentiment stood: part of the DNA of a successful facilities manager is the willingness (and confidence) to face failure and either defeat it, or learn from it.

Leadership

Much has been written about leadership, and unsurprisingly it features as a characteristic of the successful FM. In the context of the discussion, the panel displayed an expectation of very high standards and the force of personality to meet them personally, and to drive their team to do the same – what might be referred to as a passion for excellence. This is an important element of *how* they do, rather than *what* they do, and fits with the Aristotelian tenet: "*We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.*" And habits are something that we have control over.

Luck

A final question: does luck play a part? Views differed on this, but the consensus seemed very much to be that you make your own luck. It was disappointing to hear a number of audience members state that their first boss was not a good one, an experience shared by one or two among the panel of award winners. Yet this does not appear to have hindered people's careers, and in fact it could be said that it might have had the opposite effect.

7. Some take-aways

The DNA of a successful Facilities Manager event was intended to be a stimulating and enjoyable networking event – far from a scientific experiment, but we nevertheless learned quite a lot from the unique opportunity the event gave us to test for the building blocks that make up a successful facilities manager. So what makes up the DNA? These are the key take-aways that are worth further thought.

Confidence is key. Experience is vital to instilling confidence; and experience takes time. But experience alone doesn't mean you will be confident.

Be bold. Use your confidence to act boldly. Recognise that failure is a possibility, but accept that failure is a vital part of learning and gaining experience.

Personality type. Whether you're outgoing or introverted, you can still be highly successful if you have a passion for excellence.

Recruitment. If you recruit into the sector, be sure to look for attributes (*how* people do) as well as competencies (*what* people do) if you want to identify future talent.

Development. If you are responsible for developing people in your team, or you want to look at your own personal development, focus on ways to improve attitude as well as skills. How can you instill confidence, encourage challenge, support failure, or feed passion? Training doubtless has a part to play, but what other personal development tools might you use?

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Appendix

The following is a list of characteristics that were generated from the nine discussion groups at the event, each led by a BIFM FM of the Year winner.

Literal phrases below were collated by the moderator, and have been grouped here for ease of reading – groupings are open to discussion.

Competencies / behaviours:

what are you good at?

Adaptability
Basic/simple skills
Coach/manager
Communication
Customer service excellence
Delegator
Flexing your style / adaptable
Good strategy
Identify key stakeholders
Innovation
Juggler / prioritiser
Knowledge base / credibility
Know when to challenge
Know your audience
Leadership
Listening skills
Negotiating
Networking
Relationships
Taking people on a journey
Understanding / good judge of people

Attitudes:

what sort of a person are you?

Accessible
Accountability
Approachable
Common sense
Confidence
Control freak?
Dedication
Diplomatic
Drive
Empathy
Experience
High standards
Humility
Inspiring
Introvert/extrovert?
No shrinking violet
Passion
Positive
Pride
Put people first
Resilience
Respect
Results-driven
Sense of humour
Tenacity
Thick skinned
Understanding
Unflappable
Visionary