

## **The Improvement of the Competencies (Abilities) of the Mayors of the Lithuanian Municipalities: The Opinion of the Experienced Mayors**

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### **Abstract**

*The article discusses the importance of the competencies for the public sector organizations and institutions, especially for their leaders (managers) in uncertain conditions. It highlights research by P. Bernthal, K. Cook, and A. Smith (2001), showing a close relationship between leadership competencies and organizational effectiveness. The core competencies of the leaders (managers) of the public/private sector organizations are strategic thinking, operational management, leadership, organizational skills, analysis, accountability, communication and conflict management. These competencies are very important for ensuring success as well as efficiency of the public/private sector organizations. That's why the scientific research focuses on the specific competencies (abilities) need by the mayors of the Lithuanian municipalities. The scientific research conducted in 2023 revealed the mayors (elected in 2019) needs of competencies (abilities) such as strategic thinking, operational management, leadership, organizational skills, analysis, accountability and conflict management. Various training methods were used in 2019-2023 to strengthen these competencies (abilities), including open seminars, lectures and self-study. Looking ahead to 2023-2023 term, it was expected that the newly (in 2023) elected mayors (with the new role in a structure of the Lithuanian municipality) would have and improve competencies (abilities) such as organizational skills, leadership, conflict management and communication. The article also emphasizes the importance of the continuous improvement of the competences (abilities) of the mayors of the Lithuanian municipalities in order to adapt to ever changing conditions. The study found that introductory training programs are necessary for newly (in 2023) elected mayors, with many respondents favoring specialized courses and regional based training formats. Overall, the study highlighted the importance of specific competencies for effective leadership in public sector organizations and highlighted the need for continuous improvement of these competences to ensure successful operation of these organizations in uncertain conditions.*

**Keywords:** mayors, competencies, continuous improvement of the competences, introductory training programs.

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a significant focus on the competencies (abilities) of the leaders in the public sector organizations, state and local government (public administration) institutions both globally and in Lithuania. For these organizations/institutions operating under the conditions of high uncertainty, having certain specific competencies (abilities) of their leaders help achieve good work results. For instance, a study conducted by researchers P. Bernthal, K. Cook and A. Smith (2001) back in 2001 showed a very close connection between the competence and professionalism level of the organization leaders and the effectiveness (productivity) of the organization. Analyzing 292 organizations, it was revealed that from 75% to 85% of effectively functioning organizations apply some models of competencies for their leaders and employees. Given the changing world, it is essential not only to assess the competencies required by organizations/institutions (institutions) for today's needs but also to anticipate what competencies of the leaders (managers) will help organizations achieve successful results. Organizations/institutions expect that their leaders (managers) will work most effectively if their competencies (abilities) align with the organizational environment and the nature of the workplace (Boyatzis (2007)). It is likely that we will not find organization/institution leaders who possess all possible competencies. Therefore, it is important to identify essential, most crucial competencies (abilities) of the leaders (managers) required for successful operation of an organization/institution. Also, it is essential to determine the need for improving (developing) leaders' competencies (abilities), and thirdly, it is extremely important to foster the competencies (abilities) of the leaders (managers) that would ensure successful operation of an organization/institution under conditions of uncertainty in the long term perspective.

### **2. The scientific research on the specific competencies (abilities) of the mayors of the Lithuanian municipalities and the possibilities to improve these competencies (abilities)**

## 2.1. Aim and method of the scientific research

**The aim of this paper** is to present the results of the scientific research conducted in February-March 2023, aiming to reveal the regulation of the legal status of the mayors in Lithuanian municipalities and the peculiarities of their competencies' development and improvement.

The scientific research was prompted by the regular municipal council and mayoral elections and the upcoming changes in the Local Self-Government Law, which will enter into force on April 1, 2023, establishing a new role for the mayors of the Lithuanian municipalities. To achieve the aim of the scientific research, a carefully selected group of the respondents participated in this scientific research—the mayors of the Lithuanian municipalities who had served in their mayoral positions for at least four terms until March 2023. Eight out of ten mayors from this group (they were named – experienced mayors) completed the structured questionnaire and participated in the scientific research.

**The method used for the scientific research** was a structured questionnaire survey comprising 20 questions. One of the question groups, "Mayor Competencies and their Improvement," aimed to clarify the following aspects:

- a) The competencies (abilities) required by directly elected (in 2019) mayors (*note* - during period 2019-2023 a mayor of the Lithuanian municipality occupied these positions: he/she was a member of the municipal council, a chairman of a municipal council as well as a head of an all municipality), how often (how many times per year), in what forms, and which competencies (abilities) they had improved during this period.
- b) The competencies (abilities) that directly elected (in 2023) mayors (*note* - during period 2023-2027 a mayor of the Lithuanian municipality will occupy these positions: he/she will be an executive institution of the municipality, a head of an all municipality as well as a person (subject) organizing the municipal council sessions) should possess, how often (how many times per year), and in what forms they should undergo training (to improve their competencies), and whether it would be beneficial to organize introductory training for the newly (in 2023) elected mayors and what form would be suitable for this purpose.

The scientific research (survey) was conducted by the authors of this paper (article).

Before presenting the research results, it is important to identify the competencies of the institution's leader that are relevant and significant in the context of this scientific research (survey) and which are outlined in the State Civil Servants Competency Model of the Republic of Lithuania and its application methodology (2014). Professor A.Astrauskas explains the concept of a competence as the ability of a governance/public administration subject to initiate, make decisions and act. In this context, competence refers to the capability and authority of a governance or public administration entity to initiate actions, address issues or challenges, and take appropriate actions to achieve their objectives. This is the ability of a governance subject (institution, organization, official, employee) to perform certain managerial/public administration activities due to the rights and duties (authority) granted to them (Astrauskas, A. 2022).

According to The State Competence Model of the Republic of Lithuania and Its Application Methodology the competencies of a governance/public administration institution's leader may include (2014):

- *Strategic approach*: aligning goals with state priorities, the ability to assess the broader context, anticipate future opportunities, and capitalize on them.
- *Operational management*: setting appropriate operational priorities, organizing and coordinating activities to ensure the achievement of set goals.
- *Leadership*: the ability to lead by example, communicate a vision, mission, and goals, and inspire others to pursue them. It involves providing necessary emotional support, involving others in decision-making, fostering their growth, and creating a positive work environment.
- *Organizational skills (Organization)*: planning the execution of current tasks, delegating, prioritizing, making decisions, and acting promptly.
- *Analysis and reasoning*: the ability to perform situational analysis, break it down into component parts, identify interrelationships between the parts, extract essential information, and make informed decisions.
- *Accountability and responsibility*: assessing personal capabilities and setting realistic commitment deadlines, evaluating the impact of one's actions and decisions on the environment, taking personal responsibility for mistakes and failures and learning from them, helping others fulfill their obligations when necessary, seeking opportunities for improvement to enhance effectiveness and results.
- *Communication*: the ability to communicate with individuals and groups, choosing various communication tools to ensure the transmission and understanding of information.
- *Conflict management*: maintaining emotional balance in a conflict situation, calming the emotions of other participants, identifying the causes of the conflict, finding a resolution, applying various conflict resolution styles, practicing conflict prevention to avoid recurrence.

Many scientists identify the competencies that are important for a leader when facing a high level of uncertainty required for responding and acting effectively in high uncertainty situations. P. Northouse (2009), in the Theory of Skill identifies the need of *Evaluation of activities and results*.

Team members feel safe to constructively express dissatisfaction with work results, unexpected situations within the team are more frequently discussed than usual, including results, indicators, work organization processes, and team members' emotional states and relationships.

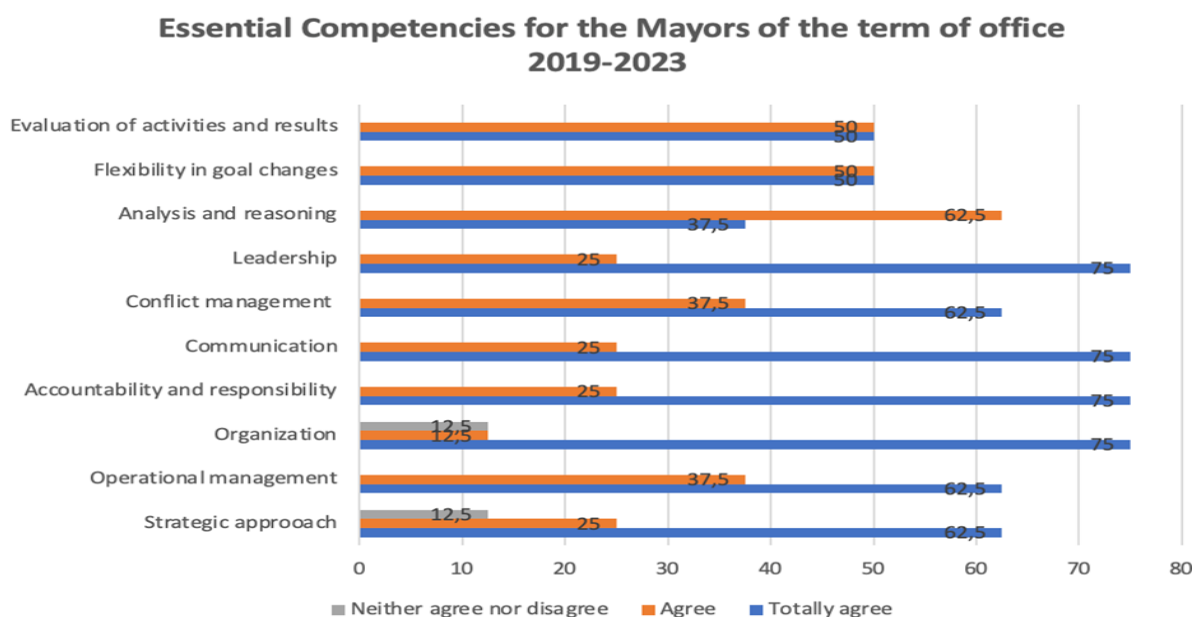
- *Flexibility in goal changes*: The ability to collaboratively formulate clear new objectives with the team, set for the short term, with all team members aware of the new goals and the tasks they need to perform on a new workday, as well as individual goals they set for themselves.

These competencies are essential for effectively and successfully conducting activities and achieving institutional goals under conditions of uncertainty. The paper will further present the results of the scientific research (survey) on the competencies of institutional leaders, namely the mayors of the Lithuanian municipalities.

## 2.2. Presentation of the most important findings of the scientific research

Taking into account the results of the scientific research (survey), it can be concluded that, according to the majority of the respondents, the following competences (abilities) were recognized as essential for the mayors of the term of office 2019-2023: leadership, organizational skills, accountability and responsibility, communication, strategic approach, operational management and conflict management, analysis and reasoning, evaluation of activities and results, flexibility in goal changes (see **Figure 1**).

Six out of eight survey participants (or 75 percent of those surveyed) said that they improve their competences 2-3 times a year. It is important to consider the context of the time, which included the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Institutional managers (as well as employees) had to quickly adapt to changing environmental and working conditions and face new challenges, such as remote work arrangements. These circumstances influenced the choice of learning formats. Regarding the question of how mayors improved their competencies from 2019 to 2023, two-thirds of the respondents (63%) chose the options "Open lecture, seminar" and "Self-study".

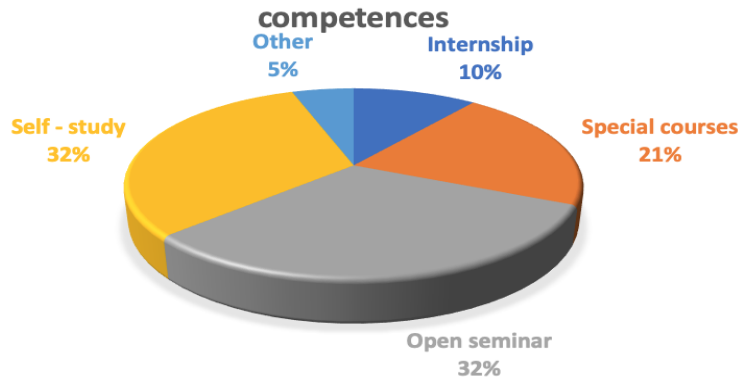


**Figure 1:** Essential competencies for the mayors of the term of office 2019-2023

According to the respondents who participated in the survey, from 2019 to 2023, the most attention was given to training in the following topics: *Leadership*, *Communication*, *Strategic Approach*, *Operational Management*, slightly less to *Conflict Management* and *Flexibility in Goal Changes*.

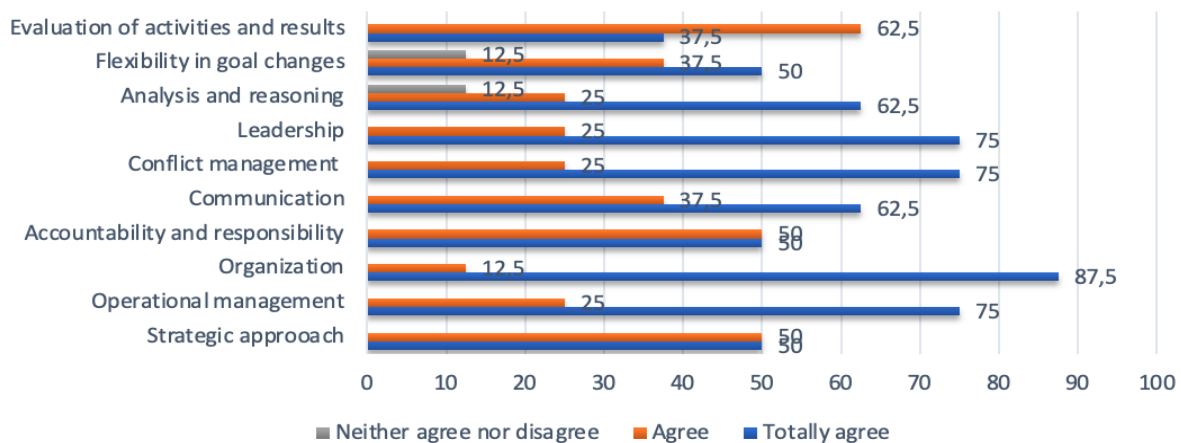
More than two-thirds of the respondents (63 %) improved their competencies (abilities) by attending open lectures, seminars, or engaging in self-study. Meanwhile, 21% of respondents mentioned that they attended specialized courses, and 10% stated that they improved their competencies during internships. One respondent under "Other" option mentioned attending training organized by the Association of Lithuanian Municipalities (see **Figure 2**).

**During the period from 2019 to 2022, mayors have attended several forms of trainings to enhance their competences**



**Figure 2:** During the period from 2019 to 2023, mayors have attended several forms of trainings to enhance their competences

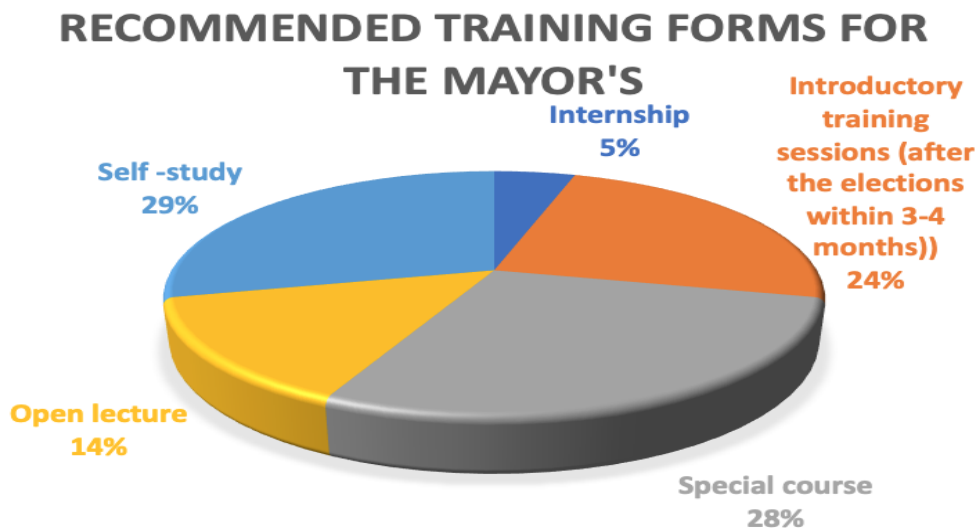
**Competencies needed for mayors for the 2023-2027 term**



**Figure 3:** Competencies needed for the 2023-2027 term for the elected mayor

According to experienced municipal mayors’ opinions, for the 2023-2027 term the elected mayor should possess strong *Organizational skills (Organization)*, meaning they should be capable of planning current tasks, delegating, setting priorities, making decisions, and acting promptly (87% of respondents fully agreed with this statement). Additionally, a significant portion of respondents fully agreed that the future municipal leader should have competencies such as *Operations management, Leadership and Conflict management (75%)*, as well as *Communication skills (62%)* and *Analysis and reasoning (62%)*, slightly less *Strategic Approach (strategic thinking skills) (50%)*, *Flexibility in Goal Changes (50%)* and *Strategic Approach (50%)*. The ability to assess activities and results (37%) received slightly lower evaluations (see **Figure 3**).

The respondents who participated in the survey indicated that for newly elected municipal mayors, the most appropriate forms for improving their skill would be special courses, self-study (self-education), and introductory training sessions (See **Figure 4**).



**Figure 4:** Recommended training forms for the mayor's for the 2023-2027 term

Based on the results of the research, all 8 respondents, or 100% of them, agreed that introductory training is essential for newly elected mayors. More than half of the respondents believe that introductory training for mayors should be organized in a training center or regional centers (for mayors from one or several counties). On the other hand, the respondents rated the usefulness of organizing introductory training through remote or self-education methods significantly lower.

In conclusion, it is essential for mayors elected for the 2023-2027 term in Lithuanian municipalities to have and strengthen competencies such as *Organizational skills* (organization), *Leadership*, *Operational management* and *Conflict management*. Competence should be enhanced through targeted special courses, introductory training, and self-education methods. The introductory training should ideally be organized in a training center or regional centers (for mayors from one or several counties).

### 3. Conclusions

1. Based on the analysis of the survey data, it can be concluded that, according to the respondents, mayors during the 2019-2023 term needed competencies such as strategic approach (strategic thinking), operational management, leadership, organizational skills (organization), reliability and accountability, communication, conflict management, flexibility in goal changes, and evaluation of activities and results. The majority of respondents (75%) stated that they worked on improving their competencies 2-3 times per year, while 12.5% mentioned doing it 4 times or once a year. It is important to consider that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the managers (including employees) needed to quickly adapt to changing conditions and challenges, such as remote work.

2. Regarding the focus on training during the 2019-2023 term, the respondents paid the most attention to leadership, communication, strategic approach (strategic thinking) and the least attention to operational and conflict management, as well as flexibility in goal changes. Most respondents (63%) enhanced their competencies (abilities) by participating in open lectures, seminars, or self-education. Additionally, 21% attended special courses, and 10% improved their competencies during internships. One respondent mentioned attending training organized by the Association of Lithuanian Municipalities.

3. For the mayors elected for the 2023-2027 term, the majority of respondents (87%) agreed that having good organizational skills, such as planning tasks, delegation, setting priorities, making decisions, and acting promptly, is crucial. Furthermore, most respondents (75%) fully agreed that future municipal leaders need competencies in operational management, leadership and conflict management, while 62% emphasized the importance of communication and analytical skills. However, strategic thinking skills, flexibility in goal changes, and the ability to evaluate activities and results were rated lower (50% and 37%, respectively).

4. The research results indicate that introductory training is considered necessary for newly elected mayors. The respondents suggested organizing such training through special courses, self-education, or regional centers. It is evident that enhancing competencies is essential for the mayors, especially in the rapidly changing world, to adapt, adjust strategies, and maintain a motivated workforce. As President J.F. Kennedy once said, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

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