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Contextual Factors Affecting the Appointment of Senior Managers in the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports According to Core Competencies

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the contextual conditions influencing the appointment of senior managers in the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports, as a key aspect of public-sector human resource management. Using a grounded theory approach, data were collected through interviews with 24 experts, specialists, and managers selected via purposive and convenience sampling. Interview data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding until theoretical saturation was reached. The findings identified three main contextual categories comprising eight sub-categories and 22 open codes. These categories included crisis management (managing uncertainty, learning from crises, promoting organizational hope, and risk management), governance policies (legal frameworks and inter-organizational coordination), and stable foundations (financial support and international networking). The study concludes that integrated attention to these three categories provides a foundation for merit-based managerial appointments and contributes to improved efficiency, accountability, and sustainable development within the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports.

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Introduction:

In today's complex and competitive organizational environment, human capital is recognized as a vital strategic advantage, and the quality of leadership and management plays a pivotal role in organizational success (Deepa et al., 2024). Effective managers are essential for guiding teams, allocating resources, and achieving organizational goals (Wang et al., 2023). Specifically, in sports organizations—characterized by intense competition, reliance on individual and team talents, and the prominent role of multiple stakeholders—the appointment of managers with appropriate competencies is of paramount importance (Seo et al., 2024). These organizations require managers who not only possess technical and specialized sports knowledge but also exhibit managerial, leadership, and problem-solving skills (Gunawan et al., 2023).

However, in many sports organizations, the processes for appointing staff managers (mid-level and operational managers) often lack a scientific, transparent, and core competency-based framework. This undesirable situation can lead to appointments based on criteria such as personal relationships, political considerations, or merely sports experience (without accounting for necessary managerial skills and behavioral competencies) (Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2024). Such non-systematic approaches significantly impact the efficiency and effectiveness of sports organizations, hindering the achievement of their performance and developmental objectives (Yazdanshenas, 2021). The absence of a comprehensive and validated model for appointing staff managers based on core competencies results in a misalignment between the competencies of appointed managers and the actual needs of managerial roles in sports (Ivziku et al., 2024). This mismatch can lead to reduced productivity, inefficiency at operational levels, and ultimately, weakened overall performance of sports organizations. Therefore, the need for managers with professional, strategic, and ethical capabilities is felt more than ever. However, one of the fundamental challenges faced by many sports organizations is the lack of a formalized and scientific model for appointing Senior managers based on core competencies. In many cases, decisions regarding manager appointments are more influenced by political considerations, personal relationships, or traditional power structures rather than professional, specialized, and performance-based criteria (Yatim & Yusoff, 2014).

This is particularly significant in sports organizations, which play a unique social, cultural, and educational role. In the absence of a clear and competency-based governance structure, decision-

making efficiency, managerial accountability, and public trust in sports institutions are compromised. A manager's personality can make or break their effectiveness in leadership and decision-making. Traits like emotional balance, responsibility, adaptability, openness to new ideas, and sociability are all closely tied to how well managers handle change, lead teams, and steer their organizations through challenges (Ling et al., 2020)(Abd Alwahab, 2022). Despite growing recognition of their importance, many sports organizations continue to overlook key managerial qualities when evaluating or selecting leaders.

The absence of systematic frameworks for identifying and appointing managers capable of navigating crises has significant organizational costs. Research demonstrates that such neglect undermines resilience, reduces productivity, and exacerbates internal instability, often escalating into organizational disorder (Reilly, 1993)(Al-Asadi et al., 2021). All too often, managers are chosen because of personal connections or outside affiliations instead of proven skills in anticipating and addressing crises. Today, however, crisis management is recognized as a core leadership skill—one that should be front and center in any approach to appointing managers (Podluzhna et al., 2020)(Saad & Haider, 2020). The problem is especially visible in the sports sector, including in Iraq, where serious difficulties in appointing Senior managers have arisen. The main issue lies in the lack of transparent, systematic, and competency-based criteria for leadership selection.

In most cases, appointment processes are influenced by informal factors such as personal relationships and political considerations rather than focusing on individuals' occupational, behavioral, and knowledge-based traits (Cai et al., 2020)(Khader & Nazzal, 2025). This practice leads to reduced organizational effectiveness, weakened accountability systems, and ultimately, diminished quality of services provided in the sports sector.

Studies indicate that in crises, an organization's response depends on the psychological and behavioral preparedness of its managers to confront unpredictable events (Smits & Ally, 2003). This preparedness is part of a manager's key competencies and must be systematically considered in selection and appointment models. However, in the absence of a cohesive framework for identifying crisis management-related competencies, sports organizations often face poor decision-making, confusion in crisis management, and reduced stakeholder trust (Smith, 2012). Furthermore, modern approaches to crisis management demonstrate that the ability to adapt to

changing conditions, flexible leadership, and organizational learning during crises are among the capabilities that must be assessed and confirmed in manager appointment processes (Robert & Lajtha, 2003). Neglecting these factors in formal appointment structures results in placing individuals in key positions who cannot guide the organization through crises. On the other hand, research evidence shows that external network ties and managers' interactions with the surrounding environment play a significant role in decision-making quality and governance (Carpenter & Westphal, 2000). The absence of managers capable of establishing strategic external communications and properly understanding the broader political and social environment hinders the sustainable development of sports organizations.

Empirical evidence further indicates that both organizational structures and leadership appointment processes exert a direct influence on governance quality and the transparency of decision-making (Zhou & Shah, 2017)(jabbar Shahbaz, 2025). In the absence of merit-based selection mechanisms, sports organizations frequently experience diminished staff performance, heightened conflicts of interest, weak oversight, and limited accountability. Beyond technical competencies, the psychological stability and behavioral consistency of managers represent critical yet often underappreciated dimensions. Leaders who demonstrate adaptability and composure under changing conditions are more likely to succeed than those appointed without such considerations (Shoda et al., 1994).

In public and semi-governmental institutions, including sports organizations, leadership appointments are frequently shaped by political considerations and governance dynamics. Poorly designed structural approaches to leadership selection foster organizational fragmentation and hinder teamwork (Garmann, 2015). Evidence also suggests that in many cases, positional power outweighs actual competence during the appointment process (Leonard et al., 1990). Such practices, when combined with weak institutional systems, perpetuate favoritism and exclude talented individuals from critical decision-making roles. Enduring challenges such as nepotism, political interference, and bureaucratic favoritism remain formidable barriers to equitable recruitment in public institutions (Hassan et al., 2024). Moreover, organizations sometimes resort to appointing individuals based primarily on personal connections with senior officials, under the assumption that this will mitigate uncertainty in competitive environments. However, such

practices lead to unqualified appointments and erode principles of fairness, transparency, and competitiveness (Westphal & Zhu, 2019).

The literature emphasizes that appointment decisions are often shaped more by environmental traditions than by structured, competency-based evaluations. In the absence of clear criteria, the likelihood of bias and inefficiency increases (Guthrie & Olian, 2006). With the increasing complexity of modern sports management, the limitations of traditional appointment systems are becoming more evident. Too frequently, appointments are driven by outdated political customs or informal networks, rather than scientific assessments of managerial competencies. By contrast, other sectors demonstrate the value of evidence-based approaches. In healthcare, for example, redefining managerial competencies in line with practical challenges has been shown to strengthen teams and enhance decision-making (Gunawan et al., 2023). Similarly, structured methodologies such as the MADM framework have been applied successfully in international projects to identify essential leadership skills in cross-cultural contexts (Wang et al., 2023). Complementary research underscores the importance of integrating self-awareness and cultural intelligence with professional expertise, highlighting that both internal attributes and acquired skills shape leadership effectiveness (Yazdanshenas, 2021). In addition, Simba et al. (2022) demonstrated that a robust understanding of managerial competencies enhances the effective use of organizational data and information in health systems. The broader body of corporate governance literature, such as the study by Yatim and Yusoff (2014), has primarily examined structural and operational practices in public companies at the board level, offering relevant insights for sports governance as well. These studies examine the extent to which Malaysian companies comply with regulatory frameworks and best corporate governance practices, showing that they generally exceed minimum governance requirements.

This research gap indicates that while good corporate governance principles at the board level have been addressed, there is a need for a similar competency-based approach for more operational management levels in sports organizations. Therefore, the main issue of the present study is the lack of a comprehensive, scientific, and validated research for appointing managers in sports organizations based on core competencies, which will fill this void in the literature on sports management and human resource management. Given the importance of meritocracy in appointing Senior managers, the fundamental question arises: What are the contextual conditions affecting

the appointment of Senior managers in the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports based on core competencies, and how can they facilitate the realization of efficient and sustainable appointments?

Methodology:

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach and an exploratory strategy, aiming to identify the contextual factors affecting the appointment of Senior managers in the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports based on core competencies in Iraq. The research method employed grounded theory with the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin, and data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews with experts, specialists, managers from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and other individuals with relevant experience. Sampling was purposive and convenience-based, continuing until theoretical saturation was reached.

The data analysis process used inductive coding in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. During this analysis, factors influencing contextual conditions were identified and formulated into a logical paradigm. The data were sequentially converted into open codes (statements), axial codes (axes), and ultimately main categories and overarching theories.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees in Interviews

Index	Characteristics	Total
Gender	Male	**21**
	Female	**3**
Education Level	Diploma	**1**
	Bachelor's	**7**
	Master's	**1**
	Doctorate	**15**
age	Under 40 years	**1**
	40 to 50 years	**12**

	50 to 60 years	**8**
	60 to 70 years	**3**
Job characteristics	Faculty Member	**7**
	Sports Organization Manager/Expert	**9**
	Coach/Player/Sports Referee	**8**
Total		24

According to Table 1, 21 interviewees were male and three were female. The education levels of the interviewees were diploma, bachelor's, master's, and PhD, with one, seven, one, and fifteen individuals, respectively. Among the interviewees, one was under 40 years old, twelve were between 40 and 50 years, eight between 50 and 60 years, and three between 60 and 70 years. Therefore, the number of participating experts in the research was 24 until theoretical saturation was achieved through semi-structured interviews. From the 22nd person, the data became repetitive, and for greater assurance, interviews continued up to the 24th expert, but no new open codes were added. Sampling for selecting experts and specialists was purposive and convenience-based. Interviews with the research group experts were analyzed using inductive methods with open, axial, and selective coding in the construct of contextual conditions.

To evaluate research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were employed. To verify the reliability of interview findings, an inter-coder reliability method was utilized. In this process, a sport. A management expert participated in the coding procedure, resulting in a satisfactory inter-coder agreement percentage.

Research Findings

The results from analyzing the interviews and summarizing the responses approved by the research group, after reaching theoretical saturation, are presented in Table 2. Relying on the systematic guidelines of Corbin and Strauss and using an inductive method (from part to whole), the main categories were extracted. In the first stage, by breaking down the interview texts into meaningful units at the sentence or paragraph level, open codes were identified. These codes were then classified within the construct of contextual conditions affecting the appointment of Senior managers in the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports based on core competencies.

Due to the extensiveness of the extracted codes, only the most important open, axial, and selective codes are presented in the following tables. Among the findings, three key factors—crisis management, governance policies, and stable foundations—played a prominent role as contextual conditions affecting the appointment of Senior managers in the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports based on core competencies.

Table 2: Coding of Interviews in the Contextual Conditions Construct

Crisis Management	Ability to Manage Uncertainty and Ambiguity	Manager's ability to make decisions when information is incomplete
		Ability to maintain team motivation and morale even in difficult conditions
		Flexibility in planning and adapting to sudden changes.
	Learning from Failures/Crises	Capacity to learn from mistakes and adverse events
		Ability to reorganize the team and resources after a challenge.
		Encouraging an organizational learning culture after every crisis or change
	Promoting Hope in the Organization	Ability to remain calm and self-controlled in facing unpredictable situations.
		Creating a sense of assurance and stability among employees
		Inspirational leadership to overcome challenges
	Risk Management	Proactive mindset to identify threats before they occur
		Developing emergency plans and backup schemes
Governance Policies	Legal Frameworks	Alignment of the ministry's structure with Iraq's 2030 Strategic Sports Document
		Constructive interaction with provincial councils in the appointment process
		Collaboration protocols with the Ministry of Interior for security background checks

	Inter-Organizational Coordination	Joint committee with the Administrative Corruption Combat Organization
		Coordination with the Supreme Youth Council in joint policy-making
Stable Foundations	Financial Support	Dedicated budget for implementing 360-degree evaluation system
		Financial incentive mechanisms for top managers (based on KPI indicators)
		Sports Management Development Fund with support from the Central Bank of Iraq
	International Networking	Membership in international sports management institutions
		Utilizing international consultants in designing competency systems
		Collaboration with international organizations like for capacity-building

Conclusion:

Based on the research findings in the contextual conditions construct, crisis management—as one of the main categories—includes concepts such as the ability to manage uncertainty and ambiguity, learning from failures/crises, promoting hope in the organization, and risk management. Identifying this category highlights the importance of preparedness and capability in confronting crises in the selection and appointment process of Senior managers in this ministry. Given Iraq's political, social, and economic instabilities, Senior managers must possess key skills in crisis management to maintain organizational performance cohesion during challenges and effectively protect the organization's human and material resources (Robert & Lajtha, 2003). Previous research has shown that crisis management is not merely a reaction to emergencies but a multidimensional process comprising preventive preparedness, rapid response, and effective recovery (Reilly, 1993; Smith, 2012). Accordingly, crisis management-related competencies—such as quick decision-making, communication skills under pressure, environmental awareness,

and adaptive leadership—must be considered as a fundamental component in the competency model for Senior managers (Gupta, 2024; Smits & Ally, 2003). Research consistently shows that managers with the right combination of behavioral and cognitive competencies in crisis management significantly improve organizational performance. Such leaders prepare their organizations proactively, minimize losses during crises, and accelerate recovery in the aftermath (Fleming & Zhu, 2017; Oparanma & Wechie, 2014). Consequently, incorporating crisis management capacity as a core condition for managerial appointments is not merely advisable but essential. This approach ensures sustainable performance under uncertainty and aligns with contemporary human resource management models that emphasize adaptability, resilience, and readiness for change (Kausar & Baghoor, 2017; Podluzhna et al., 2020).

In modern contexts, crisis management is recognized not as a reactive skill but as a fundamental leadership competency. Leaders in volatile environments—such as those in the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports—must demonstrate the ability to plan proactively, make swift yet informed decisions, and adapt effectively under pressure to sustain organizational stability (Reilly, 1993). Effective crisis management involves anticipating risks and establishing safeguards to protect institutional goals before threats materialize (Robert & Lajtha, 2003).

When embedded into managerial selection frameworks, crisis management functions as a critical filter, ensuring that leaders are evaluated not only for technical expertise but also for their capacity to anticipate risks, allocate resources efficiently, and foster collective resilience (Fleming & Zhu, 2017). Within Iraq's highly complex environment—where political, social, and institutional pressures converge—these skills are indispensable (Kausar & Baghoor, 2017). Moreover, crisis-capable leaders contribute more than operational stability: their behavioral consistency enables them to cultivate trust and confidence within and beyond the organization (Smits & Ally, 2003).

From a grounded theory perspective, this research identifies crisis management as a cornerstone of effective staffing models. The findings suggest that integrating strategic foresight, emotional intelligence, and structured planning into selection processes ensures that ministries continue to operate effectively, even under strain (Oparanma & Wechie, 2014). Embedding these competencies into the institutional framework strengthens organizational capacity to handle uncertainty and advances broader development agendas (Podluzhna et al., 2020). Furthermore, effective crisis leadership has been shown to amplify organizational performance when aligned

with proactive human resource strategies (Gupta, 2024). Thus, for the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports, incorporating crisis-related competencies into managerial selection criteria is essential to cultivate resilient and effective leadership.

Another key condition emerging from this research concerns governance policies. Effective governance requires robust legal frameworks and coordinated institutional interaction. Transparent legal structures not only provide clarity in decision-making but also enhance public trust while limiting unwarranted external interference (Pfadenhauer, 2005; Capriglione & Casalino, 2014). Inter-institutional coordination, in turn, fosters synergy and reduces conflict (Balding, 2005; Maharaj, 2009). Together, these elements ensure that appointments reflect actual competencies and align with organizational missions (Kamali et al., 2024). Integrating governance with human resource practices further improves accountability, transparency, and decision-making quality (Kim, 2023; Sari, 2023). Hence, effective governance—grounded in clear legal standards and coordinated policies—constitutes a prerequisite for merit-based managerial selection (Murniarti et al., 2023; De Cieri & Dowling, 2015).

A third dimension relates to the concept of stable foundations, encompassing financial resources, institutional structures, and international networks. These foundations underpin competency-based selection systems, mitigate uncertainty, and align decision-making with long-term strategies rather than political contingencies (Shoda et al., 1994; Westphal & Zhu, 2019). Within unstable contexts such as Iraq, such foundations are critical for resisting political patronage and limiting the influence of personal networks on managerial appointments. Transparent procedures, objective criteria, and clearly defined rules safeguard against favoritism and ensure that appointments are driven by skill rather than connection (Hassan et al., 2024; Guthrie & Olian, 2006). Stable foundations also provide appointed leaders with the security needed to prioritize strategic objectives over external pressures (Shuto & Iwasaki, 2014).

In addition, stable infrastructures enhance institutional legitimacy and foster stakeholder trust, as competency-based appointments are widely perceived as both professional and fair (Leonard et al., 1990). By balancing flexibility with organizational stability, they enable adaptive leadership while maintaining continuity in long-term objectives (Garmann, 2015). Ultimately, stability creates the conditions under which even highly competent managers can succeed.

Synthesizing these findings, the research argues that crisis management, governance policies, and stable foundations collectively provide a comprehensive framework for leadership appointments in the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Empowering managers to interpret complex environments, manage risks, and apply lessons from past crises fosters a culture of adaptability and resilience. Concurrently, reinforcing governance through transparent legal frameworks and systematic coordination enhances fairness and accountability in managerial selection. Finally, strengthening financial and institutional infrastructures ensures resistance to political interference and long-term adherence to meritocratic principles.

Taken together, these elements not only improve the quality of leadership appointments but also cultivate a broader organizational culture rooted in meritocracy, accountability, and preparedness. For the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports, this integrated approach offers a pathway toward improved organizational performance, sustainable development, and resilient leadership. Importantly, the research underscores the critical role of securing sustainable financial resources and leveraging international partnerships. Such efforts support the implementation of competency-based policies, facilitate knowledge transfer, and promote innovation in management practices. Ultimately, the institutionalization of meritocracy emerges as the essential condition for ensuring the long-term success of leadership development initiatives. This requires linking manager selection and appointment to actual performance, fair evaluations, and providing clear career paths for managers who have proven their capabilities in practice.

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