



The Blake Group
Organizational Consulting LLC

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The Leadership Competency Craze – Part 2 of 3: correcting competency confusion

In Part 1 of The Leadership Competency Craze I provided an overview of the performance competencies. For Part 2 I will give you some ideas about how you can go about avoiding competency confusion for your organization.

For competency management to become a useful tool instead of a toy, before you choose a model, here are some important questions to ask in evaluating it.

- What were the criteria used to validate the model?
- Do the criteria make sense given your organization's intended use of the model?
- What point in time does the model relate to?
- Will it be used to improve current management practices or as a target for developing future executives, a better model or an organizational change model?
- Is the model to be used for selection, appraisal, or development? What is the model's standard?
- Does the model describe what's expected or ideal?
- Is it necessary to possess all of the characteristics to be effective?
- How does someone acquire the desired traits, skills, values, behaviors, perspectives, or attitudes?

In the current "I gotta have one, too" atmosphere of competency modeling, the methodology is often unknown or ignored. Instead, people compile the attributes of job incumbents or senior managers' beliefs.

Development Mistakes

Excessive time and resource investment. Like the jobs that they are supposed to describe, competency models should be agile, flexible, and easily updated. But, that isn't always the case.

One way to reduce the cost and time required is to take advantage of existing competencies. For example, in my work, I use starter lists developed by HR or OD. Official position descriptions may also be a good source of competencies and job tasks, as well as talking with senior employees. In a one-day workshop with senior job incumbents, it is possible to conduct a high-level job analysis, identify relevant core competencies from an existing pool, and define required technical competencies.

Wrong competencies: The purpose of building a competency model is to identify the standards of good job performance in the organization. The foundation of success with competencies is built by the people who know the jobs thoroughly.

Too many competencies: Less is usually more. Competency models often consist of as many as 20 to 30 items. Instead of pushing for big numbers, management should identify about eight common, core competencies.

Competencies are linked to the past and not the future: You need to be able to answer the question: "Given our future strategy, what knowledge, skills, and abilities should our leaders possess?" The answer today may not be the same as it was five years ago.

Implementation Challenges

Attention to measurement: It is important to quantify performance levels and gaps to set priorities and document progress. But, it also requires competencies be developed and defined in terms of behaviors that can be measured or observed.

When used for individual development planning, absolute accuracy in measuring proficiency isn't necessary. After all, the objective is to identify the top two or three competencies that the employee should concentrate on to improve performance.

Unrealistic expectations: As with any tool, there's a limit on how much can be achieved with competencies. They may be most beneficial when used for learning and development. Implementing competencies can't fix an organization, but it can be a starting point.

Lack of organizational support: Organizations should invest time and resources in developing leadership competencies only as part of a larger commitment to workforce development. Employees need these factors to properly develop their skills:

- An assessment to pinpoint where they need to improve
- The ability to set developmental goals and help from their supervisor in doing so
- Learning resources, for example, online courses, books, audiotapes, and classroom training
- Opportunities to try out new skills or knowledge in an environment where they can make mistakes without penalties
- Constructive feedback on how they're doing.

Implementing competency models for training and development have the potential to significantly impact employee performance. With a basic grasp of competency-based development, realistic expectations for what can be achieved, and above all-some common sense, you can greatly increase your ROI.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of using competencies is that they help create job awareness. Competencies provide a language that helps employees and supervisors communicate more effectively about job performance. First-level supervisors, in particular, gain clarity about what it takes to succeed in the organization, and managers can better help employees reach their full potential.

Next month: Part 3 of The Leadership Competency Craze – conquering competencies.

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