

thinktwice™ Today

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August 2006—Making Competencies Practical

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ASK THE COACH

Q: I'm a manager. What can I do to get competency discussions going with my employees?

A: As a first step, let employees know *why competencies matter*. Talk about concrete ways that competencies support their success. Then ask employees to assess themselves on relevant competencies, asking them to rate themselves on a scale of 1-5. Next, discuss their ratings and provide support, to see if their perceptions match yours. Follow this with regular updates where you discuss competencies and share examples of how they've been used. When you help translate competencies into clear language and meaningful examples, it makes it easier for employees to embrace and use them daily.

-Pam Owens, our guest Coach, is a TLG Associate specializing in competency-based systems.



Common Competency Pitfalls

What makes competencies difficult for so many employees and managers to grasp and apply to their everyday jobs? Below are some of the common pitfalls companies make in introducing and communicating competencies in their organizations. Which have you been guilty of?

1. Overcomplicating

The rule in talking about competencies is: *keep it simple and practical*. Yet there is a tendency in companies to overcomplicate with "academic" explanations of competencies or models that are visually difficult to navigate. [Click here](#) for tips on explaining competencies in simple terms.

2. Going Too Fast

Don't try to "hose people down" with one broad competency roll-out. For many people, it will take time to digest competencies and see their benefits...and more than one PowerPoint training.

3. Making it an HR Project

In many organizations, the HR Department drives the competency process, acts as the champion and pushes competencies through the organization. The result is usually resistance. Managers and employees won't see competencies as business-critical. They'll see them as something HR is "making them use".

4. Assuming People Will Use Them

You've introduced competencies. You've talked about how to use them in different applications such as coaching, selection and career development. Everyone gave their approval, complimented the competencies and head-nodded.

Why aren't they being used effectively? Don't assume that people in your organization will quickly "get" how competencies translate to their everyday jobs.

5. Shortcutting Involvement

"Where did these come from?" "This doesn't relate to *my* job." These are common responses when employees are presented with a new organizational competency model. You'll be able to tell a strong story and gain buy-in if you involve individuals from different functional areas and organizational levels in building your competencies every step of the way. Unfortunately, many organizations shortcut this involvement to meet a deadline or because key leaders already think they know what the competencies should be. Remember that shortcutting involvement and buy-in on the front end leads to resistance when competencies are rolled out.

6. Not "Validating"

Many organizations try to create competencies on their own, then link them to HR systems. The danger is the competencies or their application may not be legally valid. This could end in a costly EEO lawsuit or settlement down the road. If you're going to use competencies in systems that can affect employees' paychecks or jobs, you must follow rigorous processes and guidelines that can stand up in court. Check with an expert before developing competencies or applying them to HR systems.

See our article on page 2 for tips on making competencies practical.

President's Perspective

Simply put, competencies are things people need to *know*, learn to *do*, or must *have naturally* to be successful. It's through competencies that people achieve, or don't achieve, their goals. Learning about competencies and discussing them helps you learn about yourself — where you're strong, where your natural talents lie, what it will take for you to be successful, what you know and what you don't know. This month's newsletter is dedicated to making competencies more practical, user-friendly and applicable to the people in your organization. Happy insights!

—Phyllis Roteman, President



WHAT ARE COMPETENCIES ANYWAY?

Competencies are the knowledge, skills and personal traits needed to be successful in a role. They are defined by behaviors that explain what each competency looks like when used effectively.

DID YOU KNOW ?

When employees understand performance standards, individual performance increases by approximately **36%**.

—2002 Corporate Leadership Council study on performance management

FACT

Companies with better “people management” practices can improve their market value by as much as **47%**.

—2002 Watson Wyatt Human Capital Index Study

Making Competencies Practical

Recycling. Regular exercise. Daily flossing. We’re told that we *should* do them. They’re good ideas. They’re also difficult and inconvenient for most people. There are always higher priorities and more important things to do.

Competencies can fall into that category of “smart idea” that most people agree with, but are difficult to actually implement. No matter how good your competency model is on paper, people won’t use it if it’s not easy to apply. How do you make competencies practical and user-friendly for busy individuals in your organization?

Involvement Builds Ownership

By nature, people want to use ideas or solutions that they’ve helped create.

Involving your internal customers in the development, communication and roll-out of competencies builds buy-in and ownership. This process takes time and patience, but ensures that people in the organization will see your competencies as more than generic words on a page.

Whitney Stuver, HR Manager of Learning and Development at Zenith Insurance Company knows that *involving individuals in the development of competencies* is critical to success. Before developing its company-wide competencies, Zenith conducted several rounds of focus groups, including both employees and managers who were considered top performers in terms of their results and behaviors. Focus group participants were later kept involved in the development process by reviewing competency model drafts, giving feedback and participating in the early communications to the rest of the organization. When the competencies were officially rolled out, there was ownership throughout the organization.

Ask Questions that Make People Think Managers and employees are busier than ever. So it’s not surprising that a big challenge in implementing competencies is getting people to *take time to think* about what competencies mean and how to use them.

Mary Altuvilla, a Loyalty Group Associate, says that she often sees people “thinking about competencies in broad terms – and not drilling down to behaviors.”

She suggests asking people questions that help them think about specific behaviors and how they apply to their jobs. For example:

- For employee development: *What are your two greatest strengths and why? What are two areas in which you need or want to develop, and why?*
- For discussing performance expectations: *Which competencies and behaviors are most going to help you reach your goals? What are examples of ways you will use them to reach your goals?*
- For selection: *What are the four highest priority (“must have”) competencies and behaviors for this position? Why are they so critical? How will you know them when you see them in a candidate?*
- For addressing performance issues: *Which competencies and behaviors is the person not demonstrating effectively? What are some specific examples? Is this something that is trainable (a skill) or not trainable (a personal trait)?*

Remember that people make time for what *they perceive* as valuable. Involve them in the process and ask questions to build value and make competencies practical.

Coming Next Month:

Organizational Communication Gaps

- Why does the same message get interpreted in so many different ways?
- What interferes with effective organizational communication?
- What can you do to get everyone on the same page?

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