

# COMPETENCY FRAMEWORKS ARE GREAT, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE LEADERSHIP?



“What, in your view, is currently the most important H.R. issue you face in your company?”

This question was put with genuine interest by one training manager to another at a dinner the writer recently attended. The response from all those within earshot was a hushed silence. “The identification of management competencies” came the reply. The hushed silence was immediately replaced by the lively chatter which had existed around the table before this brief dialogue.

In these turbulent times when many organisations are struggling to survive are we to suppose that the identification of management competencies is the most significant contribution H.R. professionals can make to future corporate success?

It is true that the identification of “management competencies” will spell out the performance requirements of managers, but treat the identification of management competencies as the answer to performance improvement and you may get it wrong. The identification and management of key behaviours and skills which bring success in the job is something every organisation should be able to do very easily. The result is often an incredibly elaborate manual embracing the meaning of every competency, with a description of the different levels of competency to be applied to each. This is fine, and the resulting documentation can be used in a variety of ways to promote performance improvement.

But, as we all know, real performance improvement happens when managers talk to their team members about:

- Their responsibilities and accountabilities.
- Their goals, targets, and objectives.
- The behaviours which will make them successful in their jobs.
- Their natural talents and gifts, and how these can be grown.
- Their values, personal goals, and other job satisfaction issues.
- The management style they would best respond to.
- The relationship that exists between them, and how it could be improved.
- The personal growth opportunities they are looking for.

However this dialogue doesn't always exist. Directors don't talk in these terms to their senior managers, senior managers don't converse in this way with their middle managers; middle managers don't confront these issues with junior managers.

If there is one management competency above all others which is needed it is communication skill. But often it isn't there. It seems the last thing we will do is talk – openly, frankly, and meaningfully.

Competency identification therefore can become just another piece of “H.R. speak” for managers to hide behind. Nothing will change an organisation's performance until its managers really want to get involved in the complexities of managing people's performance. The urge to do this will only stem from a desire to lead.

Leaders are realists. They understand that the individual's goals must be aligned with corporate goals. They know that corporate goals need to be communicated to individuals in language which appeals to their personal goals. They have learnt that empowering employees and participative management is about communicating a picture of what they want to achieve, gaining commitment to it, and working ceaselessly with those whom they lead to ensure the fullest understanding of what their contribution needs to look like.

There are seven elements to leadership which managers at all levels need to grasp:

## 1. VISION

Unless a leader sees a clear picture of what is his or her operation is going to look like, he or she will run the risk of evidencing wavering commitment to future plans, and of sending confusing signals to those involved in executing them.

Vision is not a statement of intent, “to be the best”. Nor is it a business growth plan, “to increase sales volumes and profits by 20%”. It is a precise description of an operation in the future which excites and attracts the leader and his or her followers.

## 2. GOAL SETTING

Leaders are achievers. They need goals. Goals need to be owned. Group and individual involvement in goal setting will overcome the fears of communicating clear goals, such as fear of failure, the fear of ridicule, and the fear of imperfect goals.

Goals simplify decision making, generate respect, provide a basis of measurement and opportunities to celebrate future achievements. Without goals, vision is but a dream.

### 3. ENERGY

Energy attracts like a magnet. Energy attracts attention and so followers. Leaders are individuals who convey authority, excitement, and meaning, through their personal energy. This energy is demonstrated through hard work, commitment, perseverance, attention to detail, and physical vitality. If managers lack energy their chances of success are minimal.

### 4 SERVICE

Just as a vision sets leaders apart from followers, service sets a true leader apart from a power-holder. If the vision and the supporting goals are mutually beneficial to all involved, it is the leader's responsibility to serve those who will achieve the task.

### 5 COMMUNICATION

Leaders are communicators. They understand the importance of effective communication. They are constantly relating to the vision and the principles surrounding it. They create understanding, look for opportunities to speak, and seek out modelling and signalling opportunities. They know that the clear enunciation of the vision, goals, and values is a never ending process. They communicate at different levels, in large groups and small, formally and informally, orally and in writing. Leaders inspire through their communication with others.

### 6 SELF AWARENESS

Effective leaders know themselves and are prepared to pragmatically deal with their strengths and weaknesses. They are secure in themselves and enjoy seeing others succeed. They understand that the vision cannot be fulfilled in isolation, and that manipulation is the least effective motivator. They maximise their strengths and surround themselves with men and women who have counter-balancing skills, insights, and personality characteristics. Their self-acceptance becomes a source of security to others.

### 7 PERSEVERANCE

Problems, discouragements, and misunderstandings will always face leaders. They realise that problems and difficulties can be overcome, but it takes perseverance. Leaders understand that although the focus of vision may change, staying power is essential. It is what separates leaders from followers. It can overcome personal problems, financial limitations, opposition, discouragement, misinterpretation, and a host of other obstacles.

The competency of managers in their jobs is a key factor in their success. If they haven't the skill they can't perform. If there isn't the innate potential no amount of training will improve their performance. If performance cannot be measured it cannot be managed.

Competencies need to be identified and measured; that's easily achieved. But the critical issue is leadership. Unless managers are also permitted, and even required, to lead, with all the risks that that entails, organisations still won't be equipped to meet their future challenges.

To encourage leadership within managers takes real courage at the top of an organisation. The decision must stem from a desire to challenge the status quo and encourage change. Unfortunately many organisations just do not want to do this. They still want mindless conformity and a system to blame if things go wrong.

When you've completed the identification of management competencies within your organisation, ask yourself this simple question – "What corporate energy has it released?" When you find that the answer might be none, turn your attention to creating a corporate culture where leadership can flourish.

You may, however, choose not to wait and to reach the conclusion that the exercise will be insufficient in itself. Organisations succeed when their managers become leaders. As a result they manage their people's performance effectively, because if they don't they will fail, and that's something a leader can never contemplate.