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For Workplace News

# Why we're still incompetent about competencies

You'd think, after thirty years of organizations looking seriously into behavioural competencies, we'd be able to get it right. Instead, while competencies have provided us with some benefits, they've also given us a lot of confusion and frustration. Go figure. The plethora of consulting organizations with "the right answer" are still doing a healthy business fixing each others mistakes.

Why? Competencies are put in place to help organizations identify competent individuals. But too many organizations are obsessed with benchmarking the "best in class." This means they go outside their own organization to identify competence. The result is that behavioural competencies become homogenized, boiled down to a one-size-fits-all template. This would be fine if every organization had the same values, the same leaders, the same business plan and the same address. But, in reality, while work processes and business strategies can be studied and copied from one organization to the next, behavioural competencies are unique to each organization.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are a manager and your company is being consulted by a leading firm that specialises in helping define behavioural competences that support leaders in "getting tough."

What does "getting tough" mean to you? Getting tough is not an isolated competency, but the culmination of a series of actions and behaviours that produce such a result. But without understanding how a manager should act tough, we can't possibly coach a manager in getting tough the right way. This over-simplification of a competency puts managers in the position of defining their own behaviours, producing multiple definitions in practice and no consistent understanding.

On the other extreme, we have over-complication. The most common example is when a competency model is made up of stages or levels. In theory, the concept of stages is sound but in reality it's fraught with problems. First, according to stage development theory, each level of behaviour must to be uniquely different and more complex than the previous level. Second, the stage development system dictates that an individual cannot proceed to the next level without reaching equilibrium at the current level or, simply put: a person cannot "jump" from level one to level three without having successfully mastered level two.

In the real world, managers don't have the time and employees don't have the patience to use multiple levels. They only need to know what actions they should take for the role they are in to be successful in a way that is consistent with the company values. By having too many levels and definitions, the

process confuses employees, complicates human resources activities, and encourages managers and employees to quietly abandon the entire process. As for those "differentiated" definitions, employees know that there is no direct correlation between being more senior and having a need for a "higher level" of behaviour. As a result they become cynical about the entire program in particular and HR in general.

### Share your Views

How serious is our problem with competencies? I think problems are rampant, but I would like to ask readers to help me with some information:

- Does your organization have defined behavioural competencies?
- How were the competencies for your organization developed? (i.e. internally through discussion with successful employees or through an existing model from a consulting firm?)
- How long have they been in place?
- If you were to reintroduce them, what is the one thing you would do the same / differently?
- What was the first application of behavioural competencies? (i.e. interviewing, performance reviews, etc.)
- What do / don't you use behavioural competencies for?
- What are some of your issues or line manager issues in the usage of competencies?
- Have your competencies been validated specific to the people in your organization, or have they

been validated by the consulting firm through its work with other organizations?

- If you have not defined behavioural competencies yet, why not?
- If you did define them and you stopped using them or changed your competency model, why did that happen? How long was the first model in place before the realization of the need to change the model?

The development and usage of behavioural competencies has arrived at a point where it deserves a hard look at what we are doing right and what we can learn from what we are doing wrong. I would like to hear from human resources professionals and line managers who have had experience with competencies. The result of any feedback I receive will be reviewed in a future column and, I hope, included in a presentation at a Linkage pre-conference workshop on May 16, 2005 in Chicago.

I thank you for your input and ideas and look forward to hearing of your trials, tribulations and successes with behavioural competencies.

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