

Five levels of competency

COMPETENCY MODELING continues to be an area of interest and debate for organizations. There is almost unanimous agreement that competency modeling is one of the most critical components to running an efficient and effective organization, but consensus ends there. To simplify the approach to identifying and developing competencies for his clients, Geoff Davidson of sales.org invited me and other colleagues to help him successfully isolate and order five levels of learning that are representative of requisite competencies to perform a given role or function. These levels, in sequence, are:

1. Principles

Identifying, defining, and applying the principles and core values to ensure that decisions and actions are focused on doing **all the right things**, not simply doing some things right.

Principles are the touchstones of our values. They represent who we believe we are, and how we want others to perceive us. Principles provide the necessary frame of reference to help us balance conflicting motivations and priorities when making decisions on what to do and how to act in different situations. Some examples from organizations with effective belief systems include:

<i>Respect</i>	<i>Learning</i>
<i>Stewardship</i>	<i>Quality</i>
<i>Joy</i>	<i>Integrity</i>
<i>Compassion</i>	<i>Conservation</i>

2. Skills

Skills represent intelligent application of knowledge, experience, and tools. It is the knowledge and understanding of how to **do things right** to complete the tasks and achieve business or personal objectives. A communications skill set,

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for instance, includes: *framing, sequencing, planning, listening, questioning, presenting, responding, and closing.*

3. Behaviours

Behaviours is the level for **doing the right things**, by converting understanding into action and translating knowledge into ability. Behaviour is also where we tend most often to falter in our commitment to performance excellence.

There are thousands of examples of learning and development programs that have been successful in transferring knowledge and understanding of Principles and Skills, but have been ineffective in converting that knowledge into the desired Behaviours and results.

One of the most notable examples is the number of programs on the risks and social issues surrounding tobacco. Society has succeeded in transferring the knowledge and principles behind the perils of cigarettes, but recent studies have shown that more people are starting, or returning to, smoking. These programs are extremely successful, but clearly ineffective.

As an aside, it is not because of a lack of behavioural scripting, modeling

or performance development. These programs are failing to establish strong enough Principles to effectively drive the correct actions and behaviours. Like many education programs, the anti-smoking campaign is struggling at this first level, the need to create strong enough personal values and beliefs that are required to change behaviours and develop sustainable competency.

4. Process

The first three Levels establish effective abilities to perform tasks, make decisions, and take actions to achieve desired results. Process is the Level that provides a framework for managing Principles, Skills and Behaviours more efficiently. In short, Process enables individuals to **do things the right way**.

In past articles I have defined this process in the four stages of: Direction, Examination, Action, and Reassessment (DEAR). Process is a critical component of strong competency, as it provides the milestones and checkpoints necessary to ensure that the best choices and actions are always being taken.

DEAR is an approach we have developed to re-map, into a single flow, the seemingly endless and conflicting sets of processes that people are facing today. Project Management, Total Quality Management, Business Process Engineering, Audit & Control, Object Oriented Design, and Earned Value Management are just a few examples that can, if kept as separate requirements, create conflict, confusion and failures in creating and maintaining successful competency based performance models.

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5. Techniques

Techniques are the advanced behaviours, tools and capabilities that experienced individuals can use to improve their performance and results. This is the Level at which Competency must be tested. Novices will generally show only a limited ability to achieve more complex results, while masters demonstrate the ability to accomplish seemingly impossible objectives.

Apprentice mechanics learn the basics about machinery and tools. They become familiar over time with which tool is used for a given need, and what are the essentials for completing a specific task. A master mechanic knows and understands these basic essentials, but through experience with different machines, problems and more specialized tools, will demonstrate the competency to think beyond the apparent facts.

If faced with the need to repair some-

thing unfamiliar, without the right tools or parts, an apprentice cannot be expected to have the experience, nor the understanding, to succeed. A master mechanic will use knowledge and experience to consider alternative tools, approaches or materials. Both may be capable mechanics, but the master mechanic, with a knowledge of alternative and advanced techniques, clearly has the higher competency.

Each of the Five Levels of Learning must be addressed in developing competency models. It is easy to overlook one of the Levels. For the last few years we have been working with a client to develop competency models for each position in the organization. The first competency models did not adequately address Principles. As a result of the senior management team defining the principles of the organization, the competency models began to reflect these principles.

From a development perspective, the goal of competency modeling is to expand training programs to include an entire suite of principles, skills, behaviours, processes and techniques. This provides the opportunity to continuously improve and modify learning materials as knowledge, experience and technology allow, ensuring programs are pre-designed to evolve in concert with learning needs.

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