

Making Competencies More Meaningful

By Markku Kauppinen

You probably work in an organization that has spent a lot of effort, time and money to identify and define very specific competencies that are needed to succeed in particular job positions. It is even quite possible that you were involved in developing such competencies. Typically, these competencies are general descriptions of the abilities needed to perform a particular role in the organization. Usually competencies are described in such terms that they can be measured. Additionally, competencies are often used as a basis for training by converting competencies to learning objectives.

The wide successful use of the competency models has demonstrated that they can work very well. At the same time, you have probably seen models that are very confusing at best. Some of the competencies on the surface sound impressive, but in practice leave the employees wondering if their organization has completely lost all sense of reality and reason. In such cases, the models are ignored by the employees and have no impact in affecting their behavior.

However, whether or not the competencies are well designed, one thing is certain: the competencies do not mean the same thing for every employee and all of them have their unique challenges in meeting them.

Take Susan and Jake for example. They are both successful Regional Managers at a large financial services company. While there certainly are some aspects of their jobs that are different – most notably the different kinds of employees they manage and the unique interpersonal minefields they consequently have to navigate – essentially they are performing the very same jobs. Their performance is evaluated against the same criteria and they both report to the same boss.

Part of Susan's and Jake's evaluation criterion is how well they perform against the 35 competencies that have been developed for the organization's Regional Managers. One of those competencies is:

Foresees issues and challenges and resolves them before anyone else sees a problem in the making.

While we could certainly agree or disagree about the merits of this particular competency, let's focus on how Susan and Jake deal with this one.

Susan has been a Regional Manager for a little over two years. She was rather quickly promoted from a Branch Manager to Regional Manager because she quickly developed a reputation of getting things done fast. In fact, her assertive demeanor gained her a reputation of being able to turn around poorly performing branches. If there was a mess to be cleaned, Susan was the person for the job. However, her direct, even blunt, style did not make her popular. But she was respected and perhaps, even feared.

Jake's reputation is very different. Although his physical presence was somewhat intimidating because of his tall and fit physique, he was well-known for being a very loyal and fair team player. While he frustrated some of his employees because of his deliberate and cautious approach, he was liked by all. Like Susan, Jake was well respected.

So how do Susan and Jake approach this particular competency? What are their unique challenges?

When Susan foresees a problem, she already has a solution. She trusts her instincts completely and confidently begins to implement the course of action she is certain will take care of the issue. The only problem Susan perceives in these situations is that others simply do not share her sense of urgency. In Susan's mind they just move too slowly.

When Jake is faced with a problem, his reaction is often quite different. While he typically comes up with a solution very quickly, Jake often begins to second-guess himself. "Maybe I need to think about this a little more", he often says to himself. "The solution cannot be this simple." Jake would then begin to think about the issue from almost every possible angle until the problem had grown, become complex and intimidating in his mind. Jake often then becomes stressed.

Susan and Jake are faced with the same situation that calls for the same competency. Yet their reactions are very different. Susan shoots first then aims. Jake aims, aims, aims and then aims again.

So, how can we help both Susan and Jake?

Many of our customers take a very simple, yet very effective approach. They make their competencies more specific and individual by taking into account how the different behavioral styles can more effectively address and implement them. Simply put, they add a behavioral style dimension to each of their behaviorally based competencies. By doing so, they are able to more meaningfully guide their different styles of employees to succeed.

For example, for Susan the additional guidance to address this competency is: *Remember that sometimes the first solution is not the best.*

For Jake it is: *Try not to overestimate the challenges and problems.*

Of course our customers have similar guidance provided to their other styles of employees. As a result, the competencies are more specific and meaningful. Employees now understand what they mean to ME.

Next time you review the competencies you have established for your employees, you may want to consider the implication they have on the different styles of employees. By doing so, you

will guide them on the right path and equip them to perform their jobs better. The best part is that the competencies will have a more specific and practical meaning to your employees. As a result, the behaviors will begin to change.

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Give Yourself A Chance

By Marshall Goldsmith

"I am a terrible listener. I've been told that for years. People at work tell me I'm a bad listener. So does my wife. I guess that's just the way I am."

It's amazing how often I hear otherwise brilliant leaders make counterproductive, stereotypical comments about themselves.

The good news is that almost all the leaders I meet have quit making stereotypical comments about race, sex, or ethnic origin. The bad news is that we still make these self-limiting comments about ourselves.

You've surely heard them. Maybe you've used them to describe yourself:

- "I'm impatient!"
- "I'm always behind."
- "I always put things off!"

We often talk about ourselves as if we have permanent genetic flaws that can never be altered.

Our personal stereotyping may originate from stories about us that have been repeated for years--often from as far back as childhood. These stories may have no basis in fact. But they

can set low expectations that produce self-fulfilling prophecies, which seem to prove that our negative expectations were correct.

I'm a good example of this. I was brought up in a small town. Growing up in Valley Station, Kentucky, I might naturally have become involved in cars, tools, and mechanical things. My dad had a two-pump gas station. Many of my friends liked to work on cars and race them at the drag strip.

As a child, however, I gained a different set of expectations from my mom. Almost from birth, I was told, "Marshall, you are extremely smart. In fact, you are the smartest little boy in Valley Station." She told me that I wasn't just going to go to college--I could go to graduate school! She also said, "Marshall, you have no mechanical skills, and you will never have any mechanical skills for the rest of your life!" (I don't think she wanted me to pump gas and change tires at the service station.)

How did these expectations affect my development? I was never encouraged to work on cars or be around tools. (As a teenager in the 1960s, I thought a universal joint was something that hippies smoked.) Not only did my parents know that I had no mechanical skills, my friends knew it. When I was 18 years old, I took the U.S. Army's Mechanical Aptitude Test. My scores were in the bottom second percentile of the entire nation. In other words, I was soundly defeated by random chance.

Six years later, however, I was at UCLA, working on my PhD. One of my professors, Bob Tannenbaum, asked me to write down things I did well and things I couldn't do. On the positive side, I jotted down, "research," "writing," "analysis," and "speaking." (In other words, I wrote, "I am smart.") On the negative side, I wrote, "I have no mechanical skills. I will never have any mechanical skills."

Bob asked me how I knew I had no mechanical skills. I explained my life history and told him about my dismal showing on the Army test. "How are your mathematical skills?" he asked. I proudly replied that I had scored a perfect 800 on the SAT math 1 achievement test. Bob then asked, "Why is it that you can solve complex mathematical problems, but you can't solve simple mechanical problems?" Then he asked, "How is your hand-eye coordination?" I said that I was good at pinball and had helped pay for my college expenses by shooting pool, so I guessed that it was fine. Bob asked, "Why is it that you can shoot pool, but you can't hammer nails?"

Suddenly, I realized that I did not suffer from some sort of genetic defect. I was just living out expectations that I had chosen to believe. At that point, it wasn't just my family and friends who had been reinforcing my belief that I was mechanically hopeless. And it wasn't just the Army test, either. I was the one who kept telling myself, "You can't do this!" I realized that as long as I kept saying that, it was going to remain true.

The next time you hear yourself say, "I'm just no good at . . ." ask yourself why not. The next time you're coaching someone, and he or she says, "I'm just no good at . . ." ask them why not.

If we don't treat ourselves--and the people around us--as if we have incurable genetic defects, we can get better at almost anything we choose. Why not?

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, *The Leader of the Future* and *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.