

“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.

Markku Kauppinen is the President and CEO of Extended DISC N.A., Inc. He helps executives to make better decisions about their employees, teams and organization. Markku may be reached at markku.kauppinen@extendeddisc.com

“When I get better at....”

by Marshall Goldsmith

In my younger days, as a newly-minted Ph.D. and consultant in Organizational Behavior, I was very “gung ho”. I would challenge my clients to pick one-to-three areas for personal improvement. Then, as I grew older and more experienced, I began to realize that three was too many. The problem was not that my clients lacked motivation or intelligence – they are all very brilliant, dedicated leaders – the problem was that they were just too busy. They all had profitability goals, growth goals, quality goals, customer goals, health goals and on and on. Multiply each of the types of goal by three and you quickly reach a number of goals that are not only impossible to achieve – they are impossible to even remember!

This insight led me to change my aspirations. I then started teaching that my clients should work on one or two behavioral change goals.

Where am I now - in terms of setting goals for behavioral change? Pick one!

What I teach my clients now is to pick the one area for personal change that will make the biggest difference – and focus on that. If we pick the right area for behavioral change, increased effectiveness in this behavior will almost always influence many other aspects of our relationships with people. For example, let’s assume that you need to become a better listener. More effective listening will lead to higher scores in all kinds of related behaviors, such as: building teamwork, increasing customer satisfaction, treating people with respect, or even becoming a better friend and family member.

The other challenge that I give my clients – if you are only going to pick one behavior for change – pick one that really matters! Make sure that the benefits of this change are truly worth your effort.

My friend, Dr. Nathaniel Branden - a world-renowned, psychologist and author of about 20 books – has taught me a wonderful exercise that helps answer the “Is it worth it?” question.

The exercise is very simple. Between five and eight people are seated at a round table. Each person is asked to select one behavior that he or she may want to change. One person begins the exercise by saying, “When I get better at...” and completes the sentence by mentioning one benefit that will accompany this change in behavior. For example, one person may say, “When I get better at being open to differing opinions – I will hear more of other people’s great ideas.” After the first person completes her sentence, the second person talks about the behavior that he wants to change, such as “When I get better at demonstrating patience – my co-workers will feel more respected.”

After everyone has had a chance to discuss their specific behavior and the first benefit, the cycle begins again. Now each person mentions a second benefit that may result from changing the same behavior, then third benefit, then continuing benefits until the facilitator says “stop” (usually after 6-8 rounds). Finally participants discuss what they have learned and their reactions to the exercise.

When Dr. Branden first explained this exercise to me, I was polite, but skeptical. I couldn’t see the value of simply repeating the potential benefits of change – over and over. My skepticism quickly went away when I saw his process work!

Nathaniel and I were facilitators at a large conference which included many well-known leaders from corporations, non-profits, the government and the military. The Officer sitting next to me was a very important military leader.

He was directly responsible for many thousands of troops. He was also highly judgmental – and seemed to be proud of it! For example, when conference participants discussed the topic of character, he growled, “I respect people with real character and organizations, like mine, with real values. I don’t believe in this situational crap!”

When we began Nathaniel’s exercise he flippantly picked, “When I become less judgmental...” as his behavior to change. I was amused and thought to myself, “This is going to be interesting!” True to my expectations, the first time around he coughed and grunted a sarcastic comment. The second time around he was even more cynical.

Then something changed. When he described the potential benefit the third time around, he wasn’t being sarcastic anymore – rather, he started becoming serious. Several rounds later, he had tears in his eyes. He sadly sighed, “When I become less judgmental, maybe my children will speak to me again.”

Since that day I have conducted this exercise with several thousand people. Many people follow the same path as the judgmental military leader. They start with benefits that are “corporately correct”, such as this change will help my company make more money, and end with benefits that are more “human”, such as this change will make me a better person. I will never forget one hard-driving executive who chose, “When I get better at ‘letting go...” His first benefit was my direct reports will take more responsibility – his final benefit was I will probably live to celebrate my 60th birthday.

As the exercise progresses, one of two realizations tend to dawn upon participants. Some, like the two examples that we have

mentioned, begin to see deep meaning and become convinced, “It is worth it!” My advice to these people is simple. Get started on changing now.

Others have a different realization – they begin to feel like they are just “making up” benefits to complete the exercise. It doesn’t seem real. My advice to them is equally simple. Don’t waste your time! If you feel you have to make up reasons why you should change, you won’t have your heart in the process – and you ultimately won’t put in the effort required to make the change last.

You don’t have to be one of my clients to do this exercise. You don’t even have to be in a group. You can do it by yourself. Pick a behavior that you may want to change. Complete the sentence, “When I get better at...” over and over again. Listen closely as you recite potential benefits. You will be amazed at how quickly you can determine if this change is worth it for you!

As an executive coach, I have given up on trying to make people change. I have realized that the deepest source of inspiration for you – has to come from inside you. Take a little risk. Look inside yourself. You may find someone who has been waiting to give you some of the best advice you will ever hear.

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.

Extended DISC

www.extendeddisc-na.com

info.usa@extendeddisc.com

info.canada@extendeddisc.com

info.uk@extendeddisc.com

info.singapore@extendeddisc.com

North America 1.800.257.7481

UK +44.203.355.6312

Singapore +65 3103 1228