Debate
Title
Competency Models: A Boom or Bane to Leadership Development?

Abstract
Experienced practitioners will debate whether competency models help or hinder the practice of leadership development. The debate will highlight the different points of view that exist among I/O psychologists with respect to competency models, examine the assumptions and experiences behind these differences, and encourage an open dialogue.

Press Paragraph
To what degree is it important for an organization to carefully articulate the competencies—that is, the knowledge, skills, and abilities—needed by individuals who take on leadership roles in the organization? Many organizations have readily taken on this task and can cite the benefits of developing a leadership competency model. However, others in the leadership development business are concerned that too much has been invested in this approach and that it can detract us from the work of developing leaders. In this session, experienced practitioners will debate whether competency models have mostly helped or mostly hindered leadership development.

Session Summary
Debaters:
Rob Silzer, HR Assessment and Development Inc.
Joel Moses, Applied Research Corporation
Morgan W. McCall, Jr., University of Southern California
George P. Hollenbeck, Hollenbeck Associates

Moderator:
Cynthia D. McCauley, Center for Creative Leadership

In the last 10-15 years, we have witnessed the rise of competency models as a central tool in the practice of leadership development. Although competency models are increasingly popular in organizations—particularly those that are developing more intentional and formal leadership development initiatives, not all practitioners place high value on this tool. The purpose of the proposed debate is to highlight the different points of view that exist among I/O psychologists with respect to competency models, examine the assumptions and experiences behind these differences, and encourage an open dialogue.
The debaters will address the central question of the session: Have competency models helped or hindered the practice of leadership development? They will each have about seven minutes for an opening response to this question, providing evidence and a rationale for their positions. In a second round, each will have five minutes to rebut a statement made in the opening responses that he disagrees with. The debaters will take more extreme positions than they might normally in order to draw out and clarify key issues. In the remaining 20 minutes of the session, the moderator will facilitate audience participation; audience members can pose questions to the debate teams and offer additional perspectives on the debate. We will end with an audience vote on who won the debate.

Rob Silzer and Joel Moses will build a case for the value of competency models. Both Rob and Joel have experience working with competency models for over 20 years and have consulted with a wide range of companies on leadership development. Rob has developed and implemented leadership competency models at 25 corporations.

Morgan McCall and George Hollenbeck will build a case against the value of competency models. Morgan’s extensive research on executive development has laid the groundwork for an experience-based rather than a competency-based approach to leadership development. George has long experience in leadership development, both in the private sector, and in practice, teaching, research, and writing.

All of the debaters are known for not shrinking from presenting a point of view! Each team’s initial perspective is summarized below.

The Case for Competencies: A Step Forward in Developing Leaders

Shifting the Focus from Jobs to People. Over the last twenty years, in Human Resources and I/O Psychology there has been a clear shift in focus away from identifying the job dimensions of leadership positions and toward identifying and developing the leadership skills that leaders need to be effective. This started when organizations refused to tolerate the high cost and the amount of time it took to complete the job analysis studies. Executives and organizations wanted to move more quickly and use practical leadership development tools, even if they were not rigorously developed. This business trend was driven by the perceived need to be more competitive and to
significantly change the way they do business. Everything was getting questioned and old HR and I/O practices were being discarded for new ways of doing things.

In the 1970’s, the field of Education began widely pursuing the idea of teaching to competencies in order to improve educational effectiveness. Competencies were seen as the requisite knowledges and abilities that students needed to learn and demonstrate at certain grade levels or in certain fields of study. This seemed to set some basic floor of what should be expected of each student and provided a structure for making a wide range of educational decisions related to course content and student performance standards.

In I/O psychology competencies were not really new. There is a significant history of person-centered models from the original work by Hemphill and ETS on Executive Behaviors, to Doug Bray’s management variables in the Management Progress Study, to Dunnette’s Executive Skills, to Byham’s and PDI’s management dimensions, and to the competencies outlined by McClelland and Boyatzis. Psychologists were clearly moving in this direction.

The trend towards competencies became the leading edge of education and I/O psychology and soon spread to training programs in business organizations and then to employee development systems. By 1990 a majority of the Fortune 500 companies had developed a competency model for their managers. Initially organizations were attracted to competency models because they:
- were easily developed in comparison to job analysis studies
- focused on the person’s knowledges, skills, and abilities rather than the job
- provided a common development language in the organization
- could be used by managers in a broad range of positions
- could be changed as the skills and abilities needed in the organization changed
- could be used to develop fungible leaders who could be effective in a variety of positions.

Setting a Clear Direction for Development. Into the 1990’s the use of management and executive competency models was widespread. They provided companies with a clear structure and direction for their internal leadership development programs and initiatives. Developmental assessment centers, high potential programs,
and even succession planning systems were built around competency models. Companies were able to focus and elevate the management / leadership skills of the broad management pool. Many executives saw them as a way of building the leadership talent needed for a successful business.

Today, competency models are a way of life for many business organizations. They have expanded their influence and are often connected to a range of Human Resource systems in a company including selection, promotion, and even compensation. More than just a handful of companies have used competency models as a basis for all HR systems. A critical step is often the process that is used to identify the competencies. There are significant variations in practice, ranging from careful job analysis methods to focus groups and flip charts.

**Misusing a Useful Tool.** Competency models can be misused. Some examples include:
- Relying on the model as a comprehensive and complete list of leadership skills that are needed by every manager for every management position.
- Blindly using only the competency model to select, promote, and compensate people.
- Focusing only on the competency names and never identifying or focusing on the outcome behaviors that are associated with each competency.
- Borrowing a competency model from another company or buying one from a consulting firm without validating it for your own organization.
- Ignoring the knowledges, skills, and abilities that distinguish high performers and that may not be included in the model.

**Capitalizing on a Building Block for Developing Leaders.** It seems clear, however, that leadership competency models have been a major building block that organizations have used to raise the broad level of leadership skills in the management pool. It has provided numerous useful benefits including:
- Setting a clear structure for leadership training and development.
- Putting a tool in the hands of each manager so they can take the initiative and pursue their own development.
- Providing a way for HR managers to work with and help develop leaders throughout the organization.
- Teaching the whole organization, including the executives, the leadership behaviors and language associated with the competencies.
- Raising the broad level of leadership effectiveness in an organization.
- Providing an opportunity for I/O psychologist to have a significant impact on an organization.

Competencies are a language that provides a systematic framework for leadership development but is not a cure. Considering these benefits, competency models, while not perfect, have provided significant benefits to business organizations, the human resource field, I/O psychology, and the field of psychology.

The Case Against Competencies: A Step Backward for Leadership Development

There is general agreement that there is a shortage of leadership in organizations today. Evidence abounds (Enron, Sunbeam, WorldCom) that the shortage is one of quality as well as quantity. The shortfall exists despite our best efforts over the last 30 years to provide organizations with best-practice in leadership development. Admit it or not, our efforts have not produced the results we hoped. And although there are undoubtedly many reasons why our efforts have failed, the time has come to examine our best practice and ask, What’s Wrong?

We will argue in this debate that What’s Wrong is that we have ill-advisedly adopted Competency Models as the foundation for our practice. Adopting this model has promulgated a flawed model of leaders and leadership that fails to recognize either the uniqueness or the complexity of executive jobs. Followed to its logical conclusion, competencies would homogenize our leadership pool and acceptable leadership behaviors at a time when diversity of leadership is required to deal with a complex environment. Based as it is on a flawed conception of leadership, the competency approach has led us into wasting scarce resources in the search for the 180 or 90 or 23 “competencies” that, if the organization can only develop in its leaders, will result in organizational success. Example after example can be given of organizations that exhaust their time, attention, and money in 200+ ‘competency’ interviews, only to find that once the Competency Model is developed, the organization has little energy left for developing leaders.

Having devoted their efforts to competencies, I/O psychologists have believed
wishfully that the resulting competencies would become the language of the organization. Competencies have, only in rare instances, become the lingua franca of the Executive Suite. Senior executives continue to make their selection and development decisions the old fashion way, based on RESULTS...has she ever DONE it, can she DO this job, not what competencies she has. If they talk about traits, they use a company-specific set of general characteristics that have survived their own tests of time...Is she a quick study? Is he driven? Results oriented? HR competencies are not part of what Ed Schein calls the Executive Culture of the organization.

The focus on competencies has shifted leadership development away from getting the job done and producing results (the true lingua franca of the Executive Culture) to competencies. Developers devote their efforts (coaching, 360, even action learning) to developing competencies. No wonder their efforts are not given the “support by senior management” which they consider the sine qua non of leadership development success.

Until I/O shifts from an over-emphasis on competencies to a focus on job experience and job challenge, tying development efforts directly to the performance needs of the organization, they are likely to continue to be frustrated in their efforts to produce the leaders required in the future.