

## Competency model helps HR add value

*But senior leadership must commit to embedding competencies in all activities*

BY JOAN HILL

**H**ow can HR professionals add value to an organization? By ensuring every HR process explicitly supports the organization's vision, values and strategic direction.

One way to achieve this is competency modelling, which outlines the specific competencies required to help an organization achieve these things. Competencies define the skills, knowledge and behaviours required to be successful in specific roles.

The YMCA of Greater Toronto, for example, uses its competency model (seven association-wide competencies and seven leadership competencies) as the foundation for all HR processes, including job descriptions, recruitment and selection, training and development, appraisal and succession planning. Its competency model is touted as a critical element in employment branding.

A competency model drives organizational development and enhances employee engagement. It provides a consistent framework across an organization to ensure employees understand what's expected of them, what they need to do to be successful and how they will be rewarded.

A robust competency model:

- defines key selection criteria for jobs
- enhances coaching and development planning
- facilitates organizational development.

The caveat is senior leadership must commit to embedding the competencies in all their leadership activities.

### 9 steps to developing a competency model

**Conduct an analysis:** Start with a thorough analysis of the organization's vision, mission, values and strategic plan. Is the senior leadership team aligned with these and how they will be operationalized? What are the organization's priorities in the long-term strategic plan? What are the key themes and messages? What specific behaviours and attitudes are o-

ing to drive business results?

**Review best practice competency models:** Which is the best fit for the organization? Consider these aspects — the number of competencies, the one-size-fits-all approach, having a core set of competencies or adding additional competencies for leaders, and whether or not the organization wants to define a few mastery levels.

**Meet with the senior leadership team:** Validate the themes uncovered and address any discrepancies. Share recommendations for the structure and components of the model that are the best fit for the company. Test the commitment of leaders to this process.

**Develop a list of competencies and definitions:** For example: "Ethics: Acts in line with the core set of values of the organization; holds others accountable to adhere to the organization's values."

**Conduct focus groups:** Involve a cross-section of functions and levels, including management and non-management. Present the proposed competencies and ask participants to assess the relevance of each competency to their role. Ask for honest feedback and be open to disagreement. Synthesize the results and revise the competency model as appropriate. (An alternate approach is to conduct behavioural-based critical event interviews with employees across the organization. This approach is less time-consuming but will reduce buy-in to the final model.)

**Meet with senior leadership team, again:** At this meeting, validate the linkages to the organization's vision, values and strategic initiatives and finalize the competency model. Confirm their commitment and define their role in continuously supporting the model in all of their daily leadership activities.

**Develop a competencies matrix:** This gives you the ability to differentiate the extent to which a competency is required in different roles. Some organizations prefer levels "A, B and C"; others prefer terminology such as "basic, intermediate and advanced." Ensure there are at least five behavioural statements

for each level.

**Unveil the model:** Roll out the model with the help of functional representatives who can assist in defining requirements for levels of mastery for specific roles they are more familiar with. Providing training and a competency handbook can help ensure this process has integrity.

In Bell's call centre, for example, core competencies have been identified for team leaders and are the focus of a nine-module leadership training program. They include coaching skills, time management, conflict management and situational leadership.

**Integrate the model:** Once this process is complete, the focus shifts to integrating the competency model into all HR processes. A logical starting point is job descriptions. Ensuring job profiles reflect the organization's core competencies helps guide employee expectations. They can also be used for job postings and for interviewing and selection.

If an organization wants to determine a candidate's flexibility — her ability to adapt to different situations, individuals and groups and to understand diverse perspectives and change her approach as appropriate — then good behavioural questions could be: "Can you give me an example of a time when your plans had to be modified to handle an unanticipated change or obstacle? What was your original plan? What was the obstacle? How did you change course? What was the result?"

Job descriptions are also used to identify an individual's strengths and gaps, so they feed directly into a learning and development plan.

On a higher level, the competency model is the foundation for an organization's learning and development processes, such as:

- assessment
- 360-degree feedback tools
- performance coaching
- career coaching
- training
- developmental assignments.

Finally, defining the specific behavioural requirements for each job helps facilitate suc-

cession planning as potential successors and talent gaps are identified.

### **Some potential pitfalls**

There is no perfect tool or process to develop a competency model. If HR decides to develop a list of competencies for each role, this is straightforward for 100 employees but can be overwhelming for 10,000, especially when jobs change quickly.

The advantage to this approach is the model will likely be more accurate in predicting high performance because it's based on input from employees and their managers. Employees will also be more committed to the com-

petencies they assisted in developing.

The alternate approach —one-size-fits-all — is faster and provides a level of consistency across a company. It can reflect the organization's direction and drive behavioural change. Employees are assessed against the same competencies, so it's easier to compare employees.

The downside is employees may find it difficult to apply the competencies to their own role. A vice-president of HR, for example, needs a high degree of competence in business acumen — but how does this apply to someone in a non-management role in facilities?

Developing a robust competency model that supports an organization's vision and direction will add value. If everyone in the organization understands the model, and lives it every day, chances are it will improve the success of the business.

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