

## How to Get More Out of Your Competency Model

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Since your competency model represents what people should be doing, it should drive HR systems. Applying the model to these systems will probably be an easier lift than creating the model in the first place. The benefits of taking these steps? Better realization of whatever your goals were for creating the original model.

Competencies are bundles of related things that a company wants to do well, such as Teamwork, Innovation, and Customer Focus. There is not a universal set. Rather, companies use competencies and behaviors that reflect key goals. Competencies are usually presented with an overview concept and a corresponding set of behaviors. Here is a simplified example:

Teamwork: Work together to accomplish goals, leveraging the expertise and skills of different people and functions.

- Pursue win-win solutions.
- Seek out diverse perspectives.
- Help others when they request it.
- Manage handoffs and transitions.

These models provide guidance to employees about how to go about their jobs. If a company chooses and articulates the competencies and behaviors it wants done, then it follows that those same competencies and behaviors should be integral in other HR systems, so that systems reinforce one another and point to the same aspects of performance. For example, if hiring interviews, performance reviews, and training all refer to Customer Focus, employees will likely demonstrate that.

The concept is similar to reach, depth, and penetration. The more ways a company reinforces a set of competencies, the greater the chances that those competencies will be demonstrated in everyday behavior. That's the goal of having them in the first place. Companies pursue such depth to differing degrees. Worst case, a competency model is thrown up onto a poster that gets plastered on some wall and never gets reinforced. Best case, the competencies are reinforced in multiple HR systems. Enacting such methods is easier than determining the competencies in the first place.

### Make it Easy to Convert Competencies into Interview Questions

If the company wants certain competencies to be demonstrated, it can start by hiring people who have corresponding skills. To make that happen, you can convert desired competency behaviors into interview questions. You can teach end-users how to do it, or you can create a central bank of questions from which others can draw. Here are two examples:

**Behavior:** Take steps to enhance customer retention.

**Interview question:** Describe something you did specifically to enhance retention of a valued customer.

**Behavior:** Make decisions quickly when necessary.

**Interview question:** Describe a time when you had to make a quick decision, even though you would have preferred to do more analysis.

### Help Employees Develop on Certain Competencies

Ongoing development is for everyone, not just poor performers. It can be customized to each individual's needs, goals, and jobs. Most learning involves a combination of observing, active mental processing, and doing. Take the competency behaviors, and convert them into small actions that can be practiced. As with interview questions, you can teach end-users how to do it, or you can create a central bank of development guides from which others can draw. Here are two examples:

**Behavior:** Listen carefully to others' perspectives.

**Development guide:** The next few times you are listening to someone's opinions, ask clarifying questions, and paraphrase what you heard. Note the difference in your understanding.

**Behavior:** Hold others accountable.

**Development guide:** The next few times someone doesn't meet a goal or commitment, ask why, and see if you can work together to prevent a recurrence.

## Add a Layer of Management Behaviors

Think about inducing desired behaviors (the purpose of a competency model) from a systems perspective. Do people know that they should be doing something? Are there obstacles preventing it? Are they rewarded for it? Do managers enable it? How many companies say they value customer service or quality without providing staffing that enables the extra steps or training in how to do it.

Identify what managers can do to enable certain behaviors on their teams. In general, managers can enable behaviors by encouraging people to do them, removing obstacles to doing them, recognizing people who do them, role modeling them, etc. Sometimes, it is about what managers should not do. Here are two examples:

**To enable this desired behavior:** Provide helpful feedback.

**A manager could:** Role model the provision of constructive, well-intentioned, actionable feedback.

**To enable this desired behavior:** Take calculated risks to improve long-term results.

**A manager could:** Be careful to not punish people who took calculated risks that didn't work out.

## Encourage End-User Editing

The original competency model has to balance comprehensiveness and simplicity. The behaviors described therefore probably don't apply as is to every situation. At the same time, you want end users to reap their benefits. The solution is to allow editing to maximize their usefulness. Editing can apply to content or to terminology. Words or phrases that don't apply can be removed. Clauses like "by doing XYZ" can be added. The original model should be left intact.

End-user editing is for their own purposes only.

Similarly, end-user editing can be done for whole functions to make the model more relatable and applicable. There are two ways to do this. One is to let the end-users figure it out. Another is to have a team look at the original model, and infer what the behaviors would look like in their environment. These can be minor tweaks or full re-writes. For example, here are some competency behaviors for Collaboration, as they might look in a sales environment.

- Share customer insights with cross-functional partners.
- Involve subject matter experts in customer presentations.
- Share best practices with other salespeople to maximize the benefits of diverse approaches.

## Have a Forum to Share Best Practices and Challenges

This is sound with any endeavor. This could be a database that people submit feedback to, a periodic conference call, or a regular topic in recurring meetings. Specific points could be: Did your purposeful use of a specific behavior in the model lead to noteworthy results? Are any of the behaviors in the model too clunky? What challenges do you have in applying the model?

There are several reasons why this is a good idea. First, despite a wonderful model and helpful guidelines for usage, collective experience is a great teacher. Second, the diversity of the people and functions using the model will unfold uses, customizations, and challenges that the designers hadn't foreseen. Third, especially with some recurring coverage in regular calls, it reinforces that the model can be valuable.

There are still other ways to make your competency model go further. For example, the behaviors in your competency model should influence collective training. They should become key components in performance reviews and 360's, and considerations in successions planning. There are still others.

To reinforce two key points: First, since your model represents what people should be doing, it should drive HR systems. Second, applying the model to these other systems, and making use of the model easy on users, involves primarily writing, training, and tactical planning, not strategizing. It will probably be an easier lift than creating the model in the first place. The benefits of taking these steps? Better realization of whatever your goals were for creating the original model.