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Doing Competencies Right

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The field of talent management faces an interesting challenge. We should be fully equipped to solve any talent issue.

Yet, when corporate executives are surveyed about the state of their company’s talent, they’re decidedly unhappy. McKinsey, Deloitte and Boston Consulting Group each have found executives disappointed with the quality and depth of their company’s talent and its processes to build more. There seems to be a gap between our potential to deliver results and our actual impact.

Bridging that gap is the key to our long-term success, and we have a potentially powerful tool at hand to drive organization success — the behavioral competency model. If well-constructed, it should tell employees which behaviors are essential for corporate success in a simple and emotionally compelling way. Unfortunately, that’s an infrequent result. What’s not working?

The science behind competencies is extremely thin. Talent practices such as performance management rely on a strong foundation of academic research; competencies do not. Before we start development, we should define what we’re trying to accomplish. The purpose of competencies is to ensure employees’ behaviors support the business strategy. With that as the objective, we should identify the simplest possible way to achieve it.

Value must outweigh complexity. Managers are willing to use an HR process only if it adds more value to their life than it does complexity. That’s why the 12-competency, four-level, five-descriptors-per-level competency model is dead on arrival at most companies. That type of model might add some value, but it completely overwhelms managers, so they ignore it or do the minimum necessary to comply. Maintaining the value/complexity balance is

your secret to designing a competency model that really works.

Create an effective competency model. Remember your business goal to ensure that employees' behaviors support the business strategy. Then, do the following:

Listen to your senior team. Interview your top team members using one simple question: Which three behaviors are most critical for our success in the next three to five years?

Identify the vital themes. Review interview data to identify the four or five themes that emerge. Don't frame those themes in HR speak, just capture sentiments as they were expressed. You'll find two or three themes everyone agrees on and two or three more with some group support.

Write a short sentence that describes each theme. Each sentence should capture the behaviors in the theme and also should use the language you use in your company; be intuitive and easily understood; cause an emotional connection to the company; and be applicable across all people practices.

Here is an example: "Hate bureaucracy and the nonsense that goes with it." You read that and instantly you know what that behavior would look like. It causes a positive emotional connection to the company, as long as you hate bureaucracy. It uses the language of your organization. If your goal is to have employees' behaviors support the strategy, sentences like that will provide 90 percent of what you need.

What to Do Next

Integrate into every HR process. Use the power of HR processes to reinforce the new behaviors. They should be part of selection, performance management, training, talent reviews and 360s.

Answer the question "Why should I?" You can hold employees accountable for these behaviors through performance management, talent reviews or 360s. But pick one area and build in consequences for not aligning with the model.

Revise them when the strategy changes. You're trying to align behaviors with the strategy. When the strategy changes, so should the behaviors. The less structure you've built around them, the easier this will be.

What Not to Do Next

Define them by level. These behaviors should apply to employees throughout the organization. Measure the frequency with which someone demonstrates them.

Pay for them. Pay for results, not behaviors that enable results. "Some of the time" might be appropriate for managers and "all of the time" for SVPs.

If you can create this simple, compelling and business-driving competency model, you'll lay a strong foundation for your talent processes and remind your executives of the true value of great talent management.

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