



## EVALUATING AND DEVELOPING MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES

### **The new business reality**

Recent years have seen a major change in the world of business, with increasing globalization and the introduction of new technologies in production and business management (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1997). These changes have given rise to new, flatter organizational structures, with fewer hierarchical levels, in which jobs are constantly evolving. The typically vertical, local career path is giving way to lateral or spiral paths, with a marked emphasis on international experience. It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain stable jobs.

This new state of affairs has also altered the implicit contract between employees and company (Rousseau, 1995). Traditionally, companies offered job security in exchange for doing a good job. Now, increasingly, what employees look for in a company is the opportunity for professional development that will ensure their future employability. And companies seek to maximise their employees' competencies to ensure future results in an uncertain world. Whereas the old implicit contract was based on employees' willingness to stay with the firm for a certain length of time, the new contract is based on employees' professional development.

Some managers may wonder what will happen if they train people and then those people leave. The only answer to that is that things will be even worse for them if they don't train people and yet the people refuse to leave. In the new business environment a company's survival will depend on its employees' ability to foresee the future and make it happen (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995).

In this new context the human resources department acquires a new mission. Before, it had a fairly bureaucratic administrative task that included payroll processing, preparing job descriptions, and generic employee training. It was basically reactive and concentrated on

problem solving and firefighting to keep the internal peace. Today, the human resources department has a strategic role, given that the company's most important resource is, to an increasing extent, the people that work in it.

Today, the human resources department must select, train, evaluate and motivate employees to ensure that the company has the most capable, most committed people possible. Its role is much more proactive. Besides resolving the company's labour problems it is expected to provide added value. In the new business environment the task of the human resources department is to provide the company with the set of competencies it needs to make it competitive (Sparrow, 1994).

### **Performance appraisal in the new business context**

Many companies evaluate their employees according to results or objectives. This sort of evaluation focuses on *what* is achieved: number of units sold, percent increase in market share, improvements in profitability or quality, etc. Usually, various financial incentives depend on achieving these objectives, typically within a one-year horizon. Given that such objectives are easily quantified and measured, the valuation can be reasonably objective. It is usually done by the employee's superior, who acts as judge, interpreting the objective data in the light of relevant economic, business or personal circumstances.

However, evaluation by objectives looks at past results and so does not necessarily help to develop the competencies needed to achieve results in the future. An evaluation that focuses exclusively on results may even be counterproductive when it comes to fostering competencies, as people will be interested only in *what* they achieve, not *how* they achieve it. In extreme cases it can even encourage behaviour inconsistent with the competencies the company wishes to develop in its employees (Pfeffer, 1998).

That is why more and more companies are starting to evaluate their employees not only by objectives but also by the competencies they develop. One possible procedure recently proposed by Kaplan and Norton (1996) is what is known as the "balanced scorecard". Under this procedure indices of competency are added to indices of results, and a weighted average is calculated to obtain a final index, which tends to be tied to variable pay.

Although there are obvious advantages in enriching the traditional evaluation by objectives, the balanced scorecard procedure has a drawback. Because it mixes two such different concepts as objectives and competencies, it may give rise to perceptions of unfairness. Such perceptions are potentially very damaging to employee motivation and performance (Cardona, Lawrence and Bentler, 1999), and may even stifle employees' creativity and capacity for innovation (Amabile, 1998).

Competencies are more difficult to measure than objectives, and developing them requires a deeper kind of motivation than the purely extrinsic motivation of the end-of-year bonus. They should therefore be treated differently, both in evaluation and in remuneration. To do this, we first need to understand exactly what we mean by competencies.

## What are competencies?

The concept of “competencies” started to be used in a business context after it was used by McLelland (1973) to show that a person’s success in a job cannot be predicted solely on the basis of intelligence tests. Subsequently, Boyatzis (1982) made a study of management competencies in which a group of managers were asked what specific behaviours had made them more effective in their jobs. However, in this latter study competencies were still not clearly defined, and the concept was used to cover aptitudes and knowledge as well as attitudes and personality traits.

Over the years, the scope of the term “competencies” has been gradually narrowed, until eventually it has been restricted to observable behaviours that contribute to success in the performance of a task or work assignment (Woodruffe, 1993). If we adopt this definition, we still have to distinguish between two types of behaviour: sporadic and habitual. Certain sporadic behaviours, such as having a creative idea, may contribute very significantly to a person’s success in a task or assignment. However, we prefer to use the term “competencies” exclusively to designate habitual behaviour, as it is their habitual nature that gives competencies their predictive character.

We therefore define *competencies* as *observable and habitual behaviours that enable a person to succeed in her activity or function*. Competencies are objective insofar as they are observable, but they are also subjective insofar as the perception of a competency depends on the observer. This is not the case with targets and objectives, which are quantifiable and measurable independently of the person who measures them. This means we have to be much more careful when evaluating competencies than when evaluating objectives, as we have to take the subjective element into account. To start with, we need to have a list of competencies, with clear and detailed definitions that different observers will interpret in the same way. This raises the question of what types of competencies should be used to evaluate a company’s employees.

## Types of competencies

There are two basic types of competencies: technical or job-based competencies, and management or generic competencies. Technical competencies are the distinctive traits or features that make a person perform exceptionally well in a particular job. They usually include specific knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed for a particular task. For example, certain jobs may require a command of English or typing skills. English or typing skills would thus be technical competencies for those jobs. In this note we shall not discuss this type of competency, which may be very specific to each particular case.

*Management competencies are observable and habitual behaviours that enable a person to succeed in her management role*. They are more generic, and although each company may emphasize some of them more than others, they can be studied as a group on the basis of an analysis of the management function. From now on we shall be dealing exclusively with management competencies.

According to the anthropological model of the company proposed by Pérez López (1998), the management function consists of designing strategies that produce economic value, developing the capabilities of employees, and getting them to identify with the company’s mission. A strategy that generated economic value while impoverishing the

capabilities of employees or undermining the unity of the company would not be valid, as, among other things, it would sap the company's ability to create economic value in the future. Therefore, besides the strategic dimension, the management function also includes what we have termed the "intrategic" dimension (Cardona and Chinchilla, 1998).

*Intrategy* is directed towards developing the company's employees and strengthening their commitment to the company's mission. While strategy is measured in terms of its effectiveness in producing economic results, intrategy is measured in terms of unity, that is, the extent of the employees' trust in management and commitment to the company.

From this analysis of the management function we can deduce two types of management competencies: *strategic competencies*, which are those needed to obtain good economic results; and *intrategic competencies*, which are those needed to develop employees and strengthen their trust in and commitment to the company. To these two strictly business-related type of management competencies we have to add a third, which we shall call personal effectiveness competencies.

*Personal effectiveness competencies* are the habits that enable a person to maintain an effective relationship with her environment (Covey, 1993). The habits in question have to do with personal balance and development as well as with maintaining an active, realistic and stimulating relationship with the environment. Personal effectiveness competencies measure a person's capacity to manage herself, an essential prerequisite for anyone who wants to manage other people. They therefore enhance the effectiveness of strategic and intrategic competencies and must be considered as a type of management competencies.

Various lists of competencies have been compiled (see, for example, Levy-Leboyer, 1997). Below is the selection of basic competencies from Cardona and Chinchilla (1998). Every company must decide what competencies it needs to develop in its managers in order to achieve its specific goals. The competency profile it chooses is a clear and precise expression of the culture it wants to promote, and can therefore be used as a tool for cultural change.

## **Strategic competencies**

Strategic competencies are the management competencies associated with a manager's strategic capacity and her relationship with the company's external environment.

- 1) ***Business vision***  
She recognizes and exploits the opportunities, threats and forces in the environment that impact on the company's competitiveness and effectiveness.
- 2) ***Problem solving***  
She identifies the key features of a complex situation or problem and is able to synthesize and make decisions.
- 3) ***Resource management***  
She uses the available resources in the fastest, most economic and most efficient manner to obtain the desired results.

- 4) ***Customer orientation***  
She responds promptly and effectively to customers' suggestions and needs.
- 5) ***Effective networking***  
She develops and maintains a broad network of relationships with key individuals within the company and in the industry.
- 6) ***Negotiation***  
She secures the support and agreement of key individuals and groups that can influence her area of responsibility.

### **Intrategic competencies**

Intrategic competencies are the management competencies associated with a manager's intrategic capacity (her executive and leadership capacity, in Pérez López's model) and her relationship with the company's internal environment. For this group we propose the following basic competencies:

- 1) ***Communication***  
She communicates effectively, using both formal and informal procedures, and provides specific data to back up her observations and conclusions.
- 2) ***Organization***  
She assigns objectives and tasks to the most suitable people and monitors task fulfillment.
- 3) ***Empathy***  
She listens, paying attention to other people's concerns, and respects their feelings.
- 4) ***Delegation***  
She sees to it that the members of her team have the decision making capacity and resources they need to meet their objectives.
- 5) ***Coaching***  
She helps her collaborators to discover areas for improvement and to develop their skills and professional capabilities.
- 6) ***Team work***  
She fosters an atmosphere of collaboration, communication and trust among the members of her team, and stimulates them towards the achievement of common goals.

### **Personal effectiveness competencies**

Personal effectiveness competencies are the management competencies associated with a person's basic habits with regard to herself and her environment. They enhance the effectiveness of the other two groups of management competencies (strategic and intrategic).

We propose a list of four basic competencies, each of which is divided into three sub-competencies:

1) ***Proactiveness***

*Initiative*

She shows enterprise and determination in initiating and driving forward necessary change.

*Creativity*

She generates innovative approaches and solutions to the problems she encounters.

*Personal autonomy*

She uses her own judgment in making decisions, rather than simply reacting to the environment.

2) ***Charisma***

*Optimism*

She sees things and problems in the most favourable light.

*Self-motivation*

She acts on her own impulse without needing external stimuli.

*Enthusiasm*

She encourages, inspires and motivates others to reach the goals she sets them.

3) ***Self-governance***

*Discipline*

She always does what she has decided to do and does not give up her plan despite the difficulties of carrying it out.

*Concentration*

She is able to focus her attention on one or more specific problems for an extended period of time.

*Self-control*

She governs her emotions and acts appropriately towards different people and situations.

4) ***Self-management***

*Time management*

She prioritizes her goals and schedules her activities so as to be able to carry them out at the appropriate time.

*Stress management*

She maintains her inner balance in tense situations.

*Risk management*

She makes appropriate decisions in the face of great responsibility and great uncertainty.

5) ***Integrity***

*Credibility*

She is completely open in her behaviour and keeps her promises.

*Fairness*

She gives to each and asks of each as appropriate, without unjust discrimination.

*Honesty*

She behaves correctly and honourably in all situations.

6) ***Personal development***

*Self-criticism*

She evaluates her own behaviour and the world around her regularly and in depth.

*Self-knowledge*

She knows her own strengths and weaknesses, both professional and personal.

*Personal change*

She modifies her behaviour to reinforce her strong points and overcome her weak points.

### **360° appraisal of management competencies**

One procedure that has been used successfully in recent years to evaluate management competencies is what is known as 360° appraisal. In this system a person is evaluated by her immediate superior, her colleagues, and her subordinates (Tornow and London, 1998). Other people may also be included in the evaluation, such as customers or suppliers, depending on the type of job. In most cases, however, it is enough to have a multi-source evaluation, even though it may not be strictly 360°. The important thing is to obtain other points of view to counterbalance the subjectivity of the traditional style of evaluation in which the superior is judge and jury.

360° appraisal is not without its risks or possible misinterpretations. To use it effectively it is important to bear certain cautions in mind. The first caution is that the company must understand and communicate very clearly to its employees exactly why it is using this tool. Using 360° appraisal to assist professional development is not the same as

using it to help decide on promotion or remuneration. On the one hand, evaluators tend to give different scores depending on the use to be made of the results (London and Smither, 1995). Specifically, 360° appraisal is much less reliable when it is linked to remuneration. On the other hand, if the superior makes remuneration decisions on the basis of competencies, she will limit her scope for coaching, as it is very difficult for a person to be both judge and educator at the same time (Meyer, Kay and French, 1965). It is therefore advisable not to link improvements in management competencies to remuneration. Also, experience has shown that using such competencies as a criterion for promotion is sufficient incentive for managers to make an effort to develop them.

The second caution is that, to be reliable, 360° appraisal requires an environment of trust. It is vital that the limits of data confidentiality and evaluator anonymity are clearly understood. Both evaluators and evaluatees must trust the people, departments or institutions that will have access to the evaluation data. To protect anonymity, it is best to aggregate the information from at least three evaluators. If the information is separated into groups (superior, colleagues, subordinates), it is best to have at least three evaluators in each group. This will not always be possible, especially for the category of superior, in which case the evaluator will have to be told that her information may be presented in unaggregated form.

The third caution is that the evaluatee must have some power to decide who the evaluators are to be. If she does, she is more likely to accept the results of the evaluation. It is also important, especially when the results are to be used for deciding promotion or remuneration, that another person (normally the superior) should approve the list of evaluators proposed by the evaluatee. In any case the evaluators must represent a fair cross-section of the evaluatee's range of activities and relationships.

The last caution is that the effectiveness and meaningfulness of the evaluation will also depend on the way the results are presented. The method of presentation must be appropriate to the needs and goals the evaluation is intended to address. It has to be decided whether or not the evaluation should include variables such as: information broken down by type of evaluator; a self-evaluation; the average score of other managers; an evaluation of results over time; a comparison with an ideal or expected result; the highest and lowest scores in each competency; the mean and/or distribution of the scores; written remarks, etc. It is important to present the results in a graphic, easily assimilable style, using colours, lines and bar charts, as well as the actual scores.

## **How to develop management competencies**

Being habitual behaviours, competencies are the product of a person's innate characteristics, knowledge, attitudes and abilities. Innate characteristics are genetic traits that affect behaviour and are difficult to change. We shall therefore concentrate on knowledge, attitudes and abilities. The means for developing these three aspects are, respectively, information, training and practice (Gómez-Llera and Pin, 1994).

Knowledge is acquired through the gathering of new information: quantitative and qualitative *information* about the real world. This is usually done by attending courses or reading specialized books. In order to develop any type of competency –such as negotiation, team work or time management– it is therefore best to start by acquiring theoretical knowledge on the subject. However, transmitting knowledge is not something that occurs automatically. Integrating new information in an existing repertoire of knowledge requires



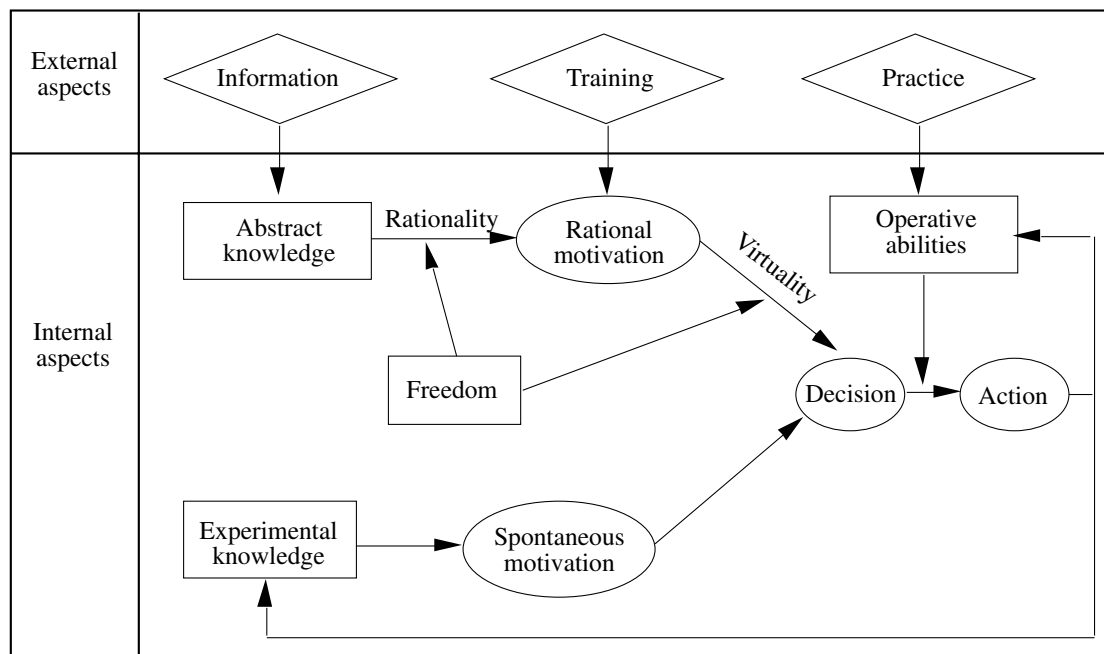
clear presentation on the part of the information provider, an appropriate channel of communication, and a certain amount of open-mindedness and mental effort on the part of the person receiving the instruction.

Attitudes are a person's motivations to action. Developing appropriate attitudes requires a process of *training* that enables the person to anticipate the consequences of her actions and omissions. This makes her better able to evaluate the real world, which may give her new motivations for action. For example, a person who has the necessary theoretical knowledge to work in a team may not necessarily want to do so. First, she will have to be persuaded of the advantages of team work in some particular situation. Appropriate training can help her to discover the positive consequences of team work both for herself and for others. Only if she wants to work in a team will she be able to develop this competency. The same is true of all competencies.

Abilities are the operative capabilities that make it possible to act. Developing skills requires *practice*. Through repetition a person acquires new and more effective habits and behaviour patterns. For example, in order to develop the competency of time management, a person must acquire various abilities: she must be able to schedule her activities, note them down correctly, check her diary regularly, etc. Developing this ability requires constant practice until new habits have been acquired.

Knowledge, attitudes and abilities are not developed in isolation. They interact dynamically to build competencies on the basis of each person's innate characteristics. Starting from Pérez López's (1993) model for evaluating managerial decisions, we can represent this dynamism with the model shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1. Model of the development of competencies**



In this model the decision-making process that leads to action starts with two types of knowledge: *abstract* and *experimental*. Abstract knowledge includes the theoretical data and information we referred to above as knowledge. Experimental knowledge comes from experience (life events and experiments). Experimental knowledge produces a *spontaneous motivation* towards the most attractive action. A person's attitude towards an action may come from spontaneous motivation or from rational motivation. *Rational motivation* is when a person, exercising her freedom, uses her knowledge to anticipate the possible consequences of an action. This exercise is what Pérez-López calls *rationality*. Rational motivation leads us to act in accordance with the appropriateness of the action.

*Virtuality* is the habit that enables a person to decide according to rational motivation, that is, according to what is most appropriate and not what is most attractive. For the decision to be translated into action, we need the corresponding *operative abilities*. Finally, as a consequence of the action, the person's operative abilities develop and new experimental knowledge is gained.

We can apply this process to any of the competencies. For example, a manager who does not have the competency of delegation could start to develop it by attending a course that explained what delegation consists of. She would receive information about it and her theoretical knowledge would be expanded. However, given that she has never actually delegated, her experience inclines her not to delegate. Her attitude towards delegation may be one of reluctance. The course is unlikely to be enough to change her habits in this respect.

The next step in the process is appropriate training, that is, training that helps a person to envisage the consequences of her actions and omissions. It can be given in interactive courses using the case method, or on the job, through coaching by a superior. In the case of delegation, the superior should start by showing by her own example how to delegate and actually delegate specific responsibilities to her subordinate. At the same time she should help her subordinate to appreciate the advantages of delegation for herself and for her subordinates. In this way, the manager will broaden her horizon and reinforce her rational motivation to delegate.

An essential aspect of developing any competency is the manager's desire to put into practice what she has discovered through external information and training. This desire, born from personal freedom, has two sides: the rational desire to use the information acquired, and the virtuality to do what is best even though it may not be the most attractive option at that particular moment. In the case of delegation, the manager first has to want to use the new information she has obtained about delegation; then she has to be capable of making the appropriate decision to delegate in each case, even when she finds it difficult.

For example, a manager may have learned that delegating involves accepting the risk that the subordinate will make a mistake. However, she may either deliberately ignore this information, or, even though she bears it in mind, she may not be able to accept the risk. If this happens, the manager effectively allows herself to be carried away by her spontaneous motivation, based on previous experience, and decides to act as she always has done before. She will not have developed the desired competency.

The last element required in order to develop competencies is the operative abilities to exercise them. This takes practice, which consists of repeating the relevant actions so as to acquire the necessary operative habits. For example, in the case of delegation, a manager needs to develop various abilities. Among others: the ability to know the people she works with, the ability to assign tasks appropriately, and the ability to correctly monitor task

fulfillment. Each ability is made up of different habits, which are acquired through repetition of the corresponding action. For example, successful progress monitoring requires, among others, habits such as recording each employee's goals and the deadlines for completion, scheduling regular checks on their progress, helping them to overcome obstacles, etc.

As a manager performs the actions corresponding to a particular competency, she starts to develop the desired operative abilities and acquires fresh experimental knowledge. This knowledge reinforces her spontaneous motivation towards this type of action, which makes it more likely that she will continue to make this kind of decision. Given that operative abilities develop each time an action is performed, each action will be more effective than the last and will produce more learning. The process of developing a competency culminates when a person's rational motivation and spontaneous motivation are perfectly aligned towards the actions appropriate to that particular competency. We can then speak of habitual behaviour.

Continuing with the example of delegation, a manager who has not developed this competency may find it hard to delegate at first. She will have to exercise her rationality and virtuality to make decisions in line with her rational motivation, against the promptings of her spontaneous motivation not to delegate. She will also find it hard to delegate because she lacks the necessary abilities to do it well. But if she starts to delegate certain tasks or objectives to her subordinates, she will slowly acquire the ability to delegate and experience the advantages of delegation, both for herself and for her subordinates. Eventually, she will reach a point where she delegates spontaneously and effectively. For her, delegation will then be a habitual behaviour, and we can say that she has developed the competency of delegation.

### **Experiences that help to develop management competencies**

As we have seen, developing a competency requires information, training and practice, as well as a determination to make the right decisions in every situation. To put this into practice we need a business context in which a person can start to exercise the competency gradually. In other words, for a person to develop a competency, we have to give her an opportunity to put it into practice. We cannot expect a person to develop a competency for delegation before she has people to delegate to. She needs to have subordinates before she can develop the competency.

If we want people to develop certain competencies, we have to offer them the jobs and challenges that will enable them to do so. Each company must find the most appropriate type of work experience for the competencies it wants to develop in its managers. Various authors have studied the kinds of experience that can help to develop management competencies (e.g., McCall, Lombardo and Morrison, 1988; Pearson and McCauley, 1991). These types of experience can be grouped in six categories:

- Carry out a new project: a new factory, a foreign subsidiary, a new product or process, etc.
- Resolve a problematic situation or one that requires a thorough reorganization.
- Take responsibility for a mission, operation or project that is already under way.
- Change from staff to line management, or vice versa.
- Expand the responsibilities of a given post by taking on new products or markets, or growing in existing markets.
- Work closely with someone who excels in the desired competency.

Besides these professional experiences, a person can use other types of personal experiences to develop competencies: family experiences, experiences in different types of associations, specific experiences with people at work, etc. Generally speaking, we can learn a lot from our own mistakes and from the problems we have with other people, both inside and outside of the company. We can also learn from the people around us: from their operative abilities, the way they behave and react in different circumstances, their values... In any case, we need to be open to new experiences and experimentation in order to elaborate better hypotheses about the real world and be able to test them (Frese and Zapf, 1994).

## Conclusion

Management competencies are an essential tool to build companies' competitiveness in the new global economy. Each company must decide what competencies it needs in order to develop its own distinctive competency and thus fulfill its mission. It must then design a system for evaluating them so as to detect competency gaps and development needs among its managers. The process of developing competencies is driven by external and internal factors which interact dynamically and require the right context. Companies that have learned to evaluate and develop their managers' competencies will be better equipped to face the continuous challenges offered by the environment. □

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