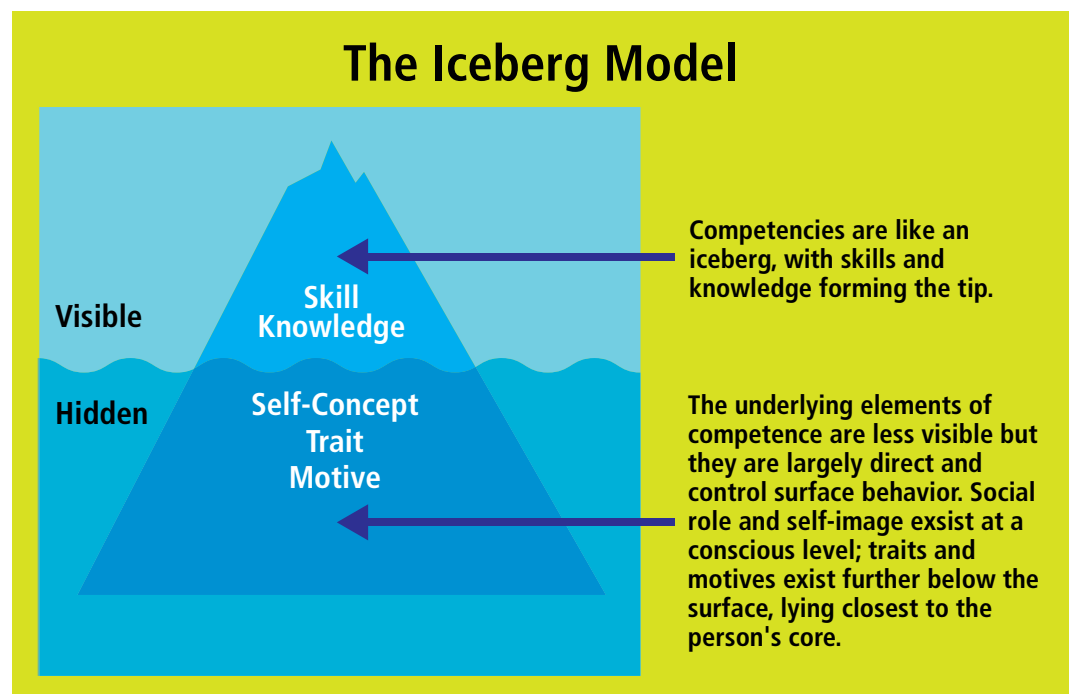


Steps to Developing Competencies

Adapted From
**Workitect's Competency
Development Guide**

WHAT ARE COMPETENCIES?

Competencies are the skills and personal characteristics that contribute to superior performance. Competencies include more than the technical skills needed to carry out the job tasks. For example, consider the job of a waiter or waitress. To perform the job, a waiter or waitress may need to master certain technical skills, such as carrying trays loaded with dishes and using a calculator to compute the bill. But to be outstanding, a waiter or waitress must also demonstrate other qualities, such as friendliness and a responsiveness to customer concerns. Thus, the competencies for a job include both technical skills and personal qualities. Competencies are the skills and behaviors that outstanding performers demonstrate more often, more skillfully, and with better results than do average performers. Competencies include various elements, some that are more visible than others—like sections of an iceberg.



HOW COMPETENCIES ARE ACQUIRED

In most cases, competencies are probably not acquired through specific training. Instead, the person is thrust into a situation where it is important to succeed and where success depends on certain skills and behaviors. In this kind of situation, the person may try to imitate available role models, and may also try out various new behaviors. If the behaviors are successful, they become habits or skills.

In this natural acquisition process, not everyone succeeds. For those who do, their success is derived from a combination of situational pressure, willingness to try new behaviors, and specific aptitudes.

To supplement this natural acquisition process, there is another process by which we can develop competencies, and that is as a component of a professional development program. This process has seven steps: (1) identification of the required competencies, (2) self-assessment, (3) observation and study, (4) practice, (5) feedback, (6) goal-setting, and (7) on-the-job support.

IDENTIFICATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF REQUIRED COMPETENCIES means that either through a job competency model or another means, you are able to understand each competency well enough to recognize it in others' behavior. Studying the behavioral indicators listed under each competency will help you accomplish this step. You must also be able to apply the competency to yourself, to know when you have demonstrated the competency, as well as when you have had the opportunity to apply the competency but did not do so. To develop your understanding of a competency, think about how you can use the competency and its behaviors in your work. In which specific situations did you use the competency, and in which situations did you miss an opportunity to use it?

SELF-ASSESSMENT means generating an accurate perception of how often and how well you demonstrate the competency. This is often a difficult step, because many people overestimate their strengths. Research has shown that two-thirds of all employees see themselves in the top third, in terms of overall performance. To assess yourself accurately, you need honest feedback from others who can observe how you work. (Tips on how to do this are provided throughout the book.)

OBSERVATION AND STUDY, accompanied by the other six steps, will help most people develop a competency. The way in which you learn, i.e. your "learning style", will determine whether you will more effectively develop a competency by studying the competency and observing other people modeling it, and then practicing it. Many people will rely on the next step.

PRACTICE means trying out new behaviors and skills in a relatively "safe" environment, such as a training course or an activity outside work, where you can make mistakes and try to develop your skill. (Part II contains suggested practice opportunities for each of the 35 generic competencies.)



FEEDBACK means receiving constructive information that conveys the extent to which your “new” behavior is observed and found to be effective. The feedback from others that contributes to the accurate Self-Assessment step is also important to knowing whether the development or strengthening of a competency is occurring. If you don’t know how you are doing, you won’t be able to modify your behavior to ensure that the competency is learned.

GOAL-SETTING means that you have established a specific goal and timetable to acquire a competency. The importance of goal-setting is described later in this chapter.

SUPPORT AND REINFORCEMENT means that when you demonstrate the competency back on the job, you are made aware that “it matters”. This support and reinforcement can be formal or informal, subtle or not subtle, immediate or long-term. It can be a pat on the back or satisfying appraisal discussion. It is another form of feedback and is essential to maintaining the new behaviors of a competency.

TYPES OF DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES

You can use a variety of developmental activities to acquire new competencies:

READINGS

Readings help provide a conceptual framework for understanding a competency. This framework may be especially useful in developing the following competencies:

- Establishing Focus
- Motivating Others
- Fostering Teamwork
- Managing Change
- Managing Performance
- Strategic Thinking
- Influencing Others

Readings can also provide ideas on how to practice or learn competencies.

SELF-STUDY COURSES

Self-study courses can provide the same advantages as readings. In addition, many self-study courses include videotapes providing an opportunity to observe others demonstrating the competency, audio tapes which make it possible to learn about the competency while driving your car, and a variety of exercises to increase your understanding and use of the competency. Self-study courses may also include tests, which allow you to check your understanding.

COURSES

Courses provide a block of time away from the job, when you can focus on development of specific competencies or skills. Most courses provide a variety of methods (e.g., readings, videos, observation, and practice). Courses can provide opportunities to practice skills in a safe environment and to receive expert coaching. A few external courses that are offered in several geographical locations are listed. Your organization's training staff can help you find other courses.

OBSERVATION OF OUTSTANDING PERFORMERS

Observation of outstanding performers can be useful in developing recognition and understanding of the competencies. To use this type of developmental activity, you must have someone to observe who is adept at the competency, and the competency must be, of course, one that is demonstrated through observable behavior, such as providing motivational support.

INTERVIEWING OUTSTANDING PERFORMERS

Interviewing outstanding performers is an easier tool to use than observation, because you do not have to be present with the outstanding performer when the competency is being demonstrated. You simply ask the person to discuss how he/she demonstrates this competency and how you can go about using this competency in your situation. It is helpful to ask the outstanding performer to talk about specific times when he/she used a competency. Interviewing outstanding performers helps to develop your understanding of the competencies. In using this method, you need not be limited to people in your own organization. Consider friends, neighbors, and people you know through professional and community organizations.

PRACTICING THE BEHAVIORS

Practicing the behaviors is the most direct method of competency development and is an essential part of any competency development strategy. This method provides the skill practice that is needed for competency development. You can use this method in conjunction with any of the others (e.g., by first reading about or observing effective behaviors). If possible, try out the behaviors in relatively safe situations (e.g., off the job) before trying them in critical, high-stakes situations on the job.

SEEKING FEEDBACK

Seeking feedback from others provides you with an accurate self-assessment. Feedback is especially important when the competencies require developing and refining a high level of skill. Ask others to observe while you try to demonstrate the competency, and ask them for feedback and suggestions. Try to arrange situations where others can observe you (e.g., conducting joint sales calls or selection interviews, managing a meeting). Let the observer know in advance what behaviors you will try to demonstrate. Ask for feedback afterwards. Another option is to utilize feedback instruments. A 360 degree feedback instrument, Soundings™ Leadership Competency Assessment, provides feedback on 140 behaviors that make up thirty-five competencies from subordinates, co-workers and managers.

In preparing your plan to develop a competency, consider all of these types of activities. The more different types of activities you include in your plan for developing a competency, the better your chances of success. At the same time, emphasize the activities that you are most comfortable with. Your development plan should fit your preferred style of learning.

DEVELOP YOUR COMPETENCIES YOUR WAY

Think about how you would go about learning a new sport, like golf. Would you prefer to begin by reading books on the theory of a good golf swing? Or would you prefer to watch professionals demonstrate their golf swings? Or, instead, would you prefer to sign up for some formal lessons and get some coaching from a pro? Maybe you would rather just get out on the course and play. Each of these approaches can be helpful. To be successful, you would probably want to use most of them, while emphasizing the types of activities that fit your own style.

If you have previously completed the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a widely-used self-assessment personality inventory, you can use the information about your “Type” to help select developmental activities that you will be most motivated to complete.

EXTROVERTS

Extroverts prefer the company of other people. If you are an E (Extrovert), you should look for developmental activities which you can do with other people, such as taking courses and talking to outstanding performers.

INTROVERTS

Introverts prefer their own company. If you are an I (Introvert), you may prefer developmental activities you can do on your own, such as readings, self-study courses, and observation of outstanding performers.

INTUITIVES

Intuitives like to consider possibilities and theories. If you are an N (iNtuitive), you will probably like to read about different theories underlying the competencies or skills you are working to develop.

SENSORS

Sensors like to deal with the observable aspects of a situation, rather than theories or possibilities. If you are an S (Sensor), you should look for readings or courses that set forth a simple, step-by-step approach for using each competency or skill. You may also prefer hands-on activities and directions for handling specific situations.

THINKERS

Thinkers rely on logical, rational processes to make decisions. If you are a T (Thinker), you will prefer readings and courses that provide a logical, analytical approach.

FEELERS

Feelers make decisions that are based on the feelings of the persons involved. If you are an F (Feeler), you will prefer activities and approaches that emphasize consideration of the feelings of people who may be involved in situations where the skill or competency is used.

JUDGERS

Judgers like to plan activities in advance and eliminate uncertainty by making decisions. If you are a J (Judge), you will probably want to have a clear, detailed development plan, and to stick closely to that plan.

PERCEIVERS

Perceivers, who value spontaneity, do not like to plan their activities in advance, and are comfortable delaying decisions. If you are a P (Perceiver), you will probably prefer a less detailed plan, which you can modify often, as your situation and priorities change. When you select developmental activities for a competency, be sure to emphasize activities that fit your personal style. If the key activities do not fit your style, you will not be strongly motivated to complete them. Your development plan should also include some activities that do not match your personal style, even if these activities cause you to feel some discomfort. The more you use different ways to develop a competency, the more likely you are to achieve success.

MOTIVATING YOURSELF FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Your professional development is critical to your long-term success as it corresponds to the value you are able to provide and your worth for doing so. Yet, you may face barriers to working on your professional development. The everyday demands of your job can take all of your time and energy—if you let them. You may not get rewarded, immediately, for taking time to work on your development plan. No one else is likely to take a strong interest in your development, if you don't. If you intend to succeed in developing yourself, you will probably need to use some strategies to ensure that you develop and maintain a high level of motivation to work on your own development.

HIGHLIGHTING THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN YOUR ACTUAL AND IDEAL SITUATION

This technique involves picturing where you would like to be several years in the future. By thinking about the size and scope of your desired job and contrasting that view with your current situation, you can consider what you need to accomplish to attain your desired job, and the skills that will be needed. The discrepancy between where you are now and where you would like to be can help motivate you to work on your professional development.

GOAL SETTING

Another way to motivate yourself is through goal setting. Goal setting involves identifying specific, measurable action steps and committing these to writing, with dates for their accomplishment. A good goal is:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Time-bound
- Realistic
- Challenging, but achievable

A good goal is specific; it states what action you will take with whom, and when. Because it is specific, it is likely to be realistic and doable. A good goal is also measurable; it should be clear to you and anyone else whether you have succeeded at the goal or not. The goal of completing all the lessons in self-study course is measurable, because it will be clear to you when you have achieved this goal. A good goal is also time-bound; it has a completion date. Only if it has a completion date will your goal have a high priority in relation to other responsibilities. A good goal must also be realistic; you should have at least a 50 percent chance of accomplishing it with reasonable effort. If your goals are realistic, you will begin to achieve them and to derive satisfaction from doing so; if they are unrealistic, you will not achieve them and be less motivated to work on other goals. Finally, a good goal (or a good set of goals) is challenging. You should have to push yourself a bit to achieve it. If your goal is challenging, you will feel satisfaction from achieving it; if it is not challenging, you may not anticipate enough satisfaction to motivate you to work to achieve it.

RESEARCH FINDINGS RELEVANT TO DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Some key research findings on development planning are discussed below.

GOAL SETTING

A large body of research has shown that specific goals lead to better performance than vaguely defined goals or no goals at all. And difficult goals lead to better performance than easy goals. A study of performance appraisal interviews, conducted by Kay, French and Meyer, at General Electric, found that improvements in performance occurred mainly when improvement needs were translated into specific goals, with agreed on deadlines and results measures.

Other research on goal setting for personal development has shown that people who are successful in accomplishing their goals tend to be aware of forces affecting their development goals and tend to think about measuring their progress toward their goals. Indeed, goal setting is usually effective only when people receive feedback that allows them to assess their progress toward their goals.

In this guide we have applied these findings by building the principles of goal setting into the development planning process.

LEARNING THROUGH ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCE

A study by McCall, Lombardo and Morrison underlined the key importance of on-the-job experience to executive development. These researchers asked successful executives to report on the experiences that had made the most difference in their professional development. Some of the key findings were:

- The executives gained more insight about themselves from mistakes, traumatic events, confrontations with subordinates, and career setbacks, than from formal counseling sessions with their supervisors.

- On-the-job experiences, where the risks and pressures are high, are more powerful than comfortable developmental experiences such as lateral transfers or promotions within the same unit.

“The more dramatic the change in skill demands, the more severe the personnel problems, and the more sinuous and unexpected the turns in the road, the more opportunity there is for learning. Unappealing as they may seem, being shocked and pressured and having problems with other people teach most.”

- Learning occurred in response to organizational needs.

“In general, adults learn when they need to or have to, and these executives were no exception. Because of the demanding nature of these assignments, learning was not a nicety—something to be done out of interest or because it might be helpful. Learning was something these managers did because they had little choice but to take action—stab at problems even if they weren’t sure what they were doing, because doing nothing was surely unacceptable. They did quick studies on unfamiliar topics, tried something, and learned from how it came out. They learned where they could when they could from whom they could.”

- Courses were effective when they addressed a current need.

“Coursework that had an impact on the executives seemed to have two things in common: it dealt with a relevant issue, and it occurred at a good time for the manager.”

We have applied these findings in this guide, by:

- Emphasizing the importance of on-the-job learning
- Encouraging people to construct their development plans to support their most important business needs
- Employing on-the-job training
- Incorporating a Development Planning Journal, with weekly reviews of progress