



It still works...

Don't throw it out just yet



Who We Are

Octane Learning is a strategic learning and development organization with offices in Princeton, NJ and Irvine, CA.

We study the best ways to integrate diverse methodologies into our learning and development programs, seamlessly combining adult learning principles with skill-based approaches and change management techniques.

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In 2018, I came across a website with suggestions of how to dust off and reuse outdated systems, software, electronics, etc. There, I found articles that revived any device that I once considered to be over the hill, taking a nostalgic click through cassette tape rewinding strategies and discovering great reasons to resurrect that old beeping pager.

When it comes to strategies in training, some "outdated" techniques may just need a new perspective...

What still works in training?

What is the latest buzz? Not competencies, for sure – many of us have fallen out of love with the concept. The premise was well-founded by McClelland, developed by Gilbert, and popularized by Boyzatis as the theory became connected to performance.

By understanding and developing focused competencies, rather than just hoping people will magically do well, an organization can make better hiring decisions, create smarter training and mentoring programs, and manage teams more effectively. A competency model is an active, vibrant, and usable tool that defines and encourages excellence, one that creates competitive advantage.

So, what's the problem?

Why do so many competency models decay in file drawers or become dusty pages pinned up in cubicles? Simple. There is a lack of focus on excellence – the quality of performance – and often the way it is nurtured. The competency model becomes a generic process that transforms a good theory into a series of missteps and results in something that means nothing to anyone at the end of the workday.

Think about what competency models are trying to solve. They come from identifying the "special sauce" of high-performing employees, using that knowledge to raise the organization's bar of excellence. No issue there – that idea should still work, right? Then why doesn't it?

The development disconnect

Just thinking about where to start can be overwhelming, raising the first problem: what should be evaluated and how? Some say the obvious answer is to begin by assessing existing employees against a set of basic competencies—fundamental skills, abilities, and intellect—that set the organization apart.

Sound the alarms! Listing generic "fundamentals" from existing job descriptions is meaningless when scaled broadly. Don't you already use these phrases in performance evaluations?

If you don't identify a difference, you won't make a difference.

Where is the focus on the *unique* strengths and attributes of your employee superstars? Where is the focus of scaling up those talents and creating a competitive advantage distinct to your company culture?

It was once agreed that, when used appropriately, competencies could help organizations enhance methods in hiring, training, mentoring, and managing. But it wasn't mainstream to talk about *how* leveraging specific aspects of excellence or unique strengths could improve these processes. So, the model still works, but if we focus on the reason for being excellent, perhaps it can work differently.

What's wrong with generic?

Generic-based models do not talk about the unique and perhaps slightly quirky ways that superstars behave, but rather seek a vanilla outcome that seems achievable by everyone. Are you hearing the alarms again? Yes, if real excellence were possible by everyone we already have, we probably wouldn't need a program to encourage it. If excellence is identified, hired, encouraged, coached, and developed, it is highly unlikely to look like the ordinary.

The disconnect continues all along the development continuum. You hire a consultant because they are an expert. Yet, much of the language used within their competency libraries is built to be generic in nature so it can be adapted to any company. Pick any competency model – it won't take you long to find statements such as, "be customer focused" or "develop business insights." What do they mean in isolation? Not a lot – and they definitely leave ample room for interpretation.

Looking specifically at one of the generic attributes, "customer focused," it's obvious that it is not possible, even within a modestly sized organization, to mean the same to a helpdesk person (externally facing), a product marketer (internally and externally facing), or an accounting personnel (internally facing). It doesn't even mean the same thing to people with the same job title, for they will all have subtle or even glaring differences in levels of proficiency and experience. As a result, nearly everybody views the final models as something HR built – nice, but not connected to their world.

So... more words?

Do very explicit and detailed models work better? That would be a good answer, but they often suffer another fate: endless boxes full of competencies, multiple levels of proficiencies, inclusive of everything everyone wanted to say. Now the model is beyond complex, and it becomes impossible to sort through anything that can be put into actual practice. Even if you could find something useful, it would still be too generic and would feel disconnected from any individual.

You see how this can happen when a great deal of time is spent interacting with HR and legal teams rather than asking the excellent people on the ground what is or could be happening. If you aren't discovering special and surprising traits, you are only drafting a document that satisfies management teams and does little to meet the actual talent development goals of the organization.

I thought you said the model still works...

It works when it signifies the specific traits of excellence in a company.
It works when it reflects a company's culture.
It works when it considers the way a company's system runs.
Above all, it works when it is actionable.



Actionable means to consider interactions between specific employees and managers. It means bringing clarity to expectations, helping coaches explain excellence, having understandable performance measures, and laying out a foundation for meaningful and customized conversations.

Tell me how...

As long as the original premise of excellence is kept in mind, a thoughtful process can be used to create a model, and it will pass the test of being actionable.

- Start with the end in mind. What exactly are you trying to improve? What would be a good outcome? Create a real roadmap with a realistic timescale.
- Know how you are going to measure both the implementation's success and the program itself.
- Make it credible. Engage champions of every seniority level and communicate what's in it for everybody. Be infectious!
- Know what's missing. How can you best conduct a gap analysis? Get real insight?
- Connect the dots and be open to reality. What do you see as excellent? Do people agree?
- Think about culture. How do you really speak inside the organization? What kind of words and descriptions would make sense?
- Be simple and buildable. Can you make it simpler but add support to managers to talk about specific roles, thereby tailoring the approach to every individual?
- Communicate and understand that rolling out the model will be a significant organizational change. That's critical.
- Circle back. Measure and maintain. Again, and again.

Excellence is now a system, not a one-time event. It's a lot to think about, and it's easy to defer to a generic approach or give up on the idea. But done thoughtfully, with focus on individual strengths and building competitive advantage, it still works.

Louise Arnold, September 2023

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