A review of
The Art and Science of Competency Models
by Anntoinette D. Lucia and Richard Lepsinger
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Rating: 9
(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out.
This produces a net five-point scale from 6-10.)

Just for the sake of this exercise, let's pretend you are part of an organization which is
dealing with a lot of change – changes in technologies, changes in the workforce, changes
in the very nature of the work the organization does. Let's further pretend that you would
really like to get some sort of handle on what differentiates the *best* performers in your
current situation from your average performers. And let's really stretch here – you'd also
like to get some sort of handle on what you think you'll need in the *future*. All
hypothetical, of course.

One approach addresses these issues by exploring competencies. Now competence and
competency are words that have enjoyed quite a bit of popularity in the last couple years.
Unfortunately, people seem to use them to mean different things. (For instance, Prahalad
and Hamel used competence – in the phrase 'core competence' – to indicate something at
the organizational level.) In *this* context, we want to talk about competencies at the
individual level.

Lucia and Lepsinger offer this definition of a competency:
> "… 'a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one's job
> (a role or responsibility), that correlates with performance on the job, that can be measured against
> well-accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development."

So a competency is bigger than a skill, includes knowledge, connects to performance, and
can be improved. That's *one* competency when treated in isolation. We get even more
power from a competency *model*: the integrated set of competencies required for
excellent performance.

When we shift from a single competency to a competency model, we have several ways
to go. We can look *generically* at the competency model for a Role, such as Project
Manager. We can look *specifically* at the competency model for a real Position – and
we'll frequently find a combination including part of one Role and part of another. For
instance, the Project Manager for the XYZ project might take all the usual stuff but
because of the visibility you might need to toss in a large dollop of Composure and a
little more Political Savvy than usual.

There's a third way to use competency models. You can focus on a person: just what
competencies are this person's strengths? And given the Position the person currently
plays or wants to assume, what are the potentially show-stopping weaknesses?

The fact that competency models focus on behavior allows the organization to bring the conversation around to what people *do* that adds value. That permits the dreaded 'development planning' conversation to take on a more subjective tone, according to the authors. In fact, the authors believe that you can use the competency models to tie together all the pieces of 'workforce management.' They write

> "The best succession planning system in the world cannot succeed unless the selection, training and development, and appraisal systems all work effectively too. These systems must be designed to ensure that people who have the required capability or potential are hired, their ability is enhanced, and their potential is nurtured through learning experiences, coaching, and feedback. We strongly believe that the use of competency models across all human resource management systems will provide the necessary consistency and continuity."

That is, if you know what separates the best from the average, you can use that in recruiting and selection, in performance appraisal, in development planning, and in succession planning. A good model provides a common framework and allows these pieces of workforce management to be integrated into a coherent system. Of course, the ability to recruit and select effectively for the future depends first on having a solid idea of where the organization is going, and hence what Roles and competencies will be important in the future. Recruiting in the present but for the past is generally thought to be a bad idea.

In their book, the authors assume that you are essentially starting with a blank slate and monitoring your best performers to determine what makes them best.

> "Starting from scratch is appropriate for developing a competency model for any job, function, or role in the organization. It is time-consuming but yields results that are role- and company-specific. ... The primary difference [in the alternative approach] is the use of a validated model as the starting point instead of extensive interviews and observations of incumbents on the job. … This method is best suited for leadership and management roles that cut across several functions and for positions that require limited technical skills and knowledge."

In the blank slate approach, you monitor the best performers to see what makes them the best. "Tell me why did that just now." Of course, to fully understand the *best*, you also need to monitor the *average* and find out what they are doing – or not doing – that renders them just average. That might get a bit dodgy if not handled carefully: "I'd like to follow you around for a bit and try to determine why you're just average."

Adopting the alternative approach allows you to shortcut this blank slate and ongoing re-invention. In the work of Lombardo and Eichinger (www.lominger.com), for instance, you can find a library of competencies that have already been identified and amply documented. Then it's a matter of picking and choosing, and perhaps even assigning priorities to competencies which are surprisingly common and surprisingly comprehensive.

Whether you choose blank slate approach or pre-populated library approach, it seems that getting a firm grip on competencies will permit your organization to have richer conversations about the demands it is facing in a changing environment. But doing it effectively requires the courage to look at the current situation honestly and the courage to own the responsibility for creating the future that the organization wants.