

Build A Competency Culture¹

Arnie Dahlke
(January 29, 2012)

T.A.S.K. COMPETENCY

HR people and others interested in personnel selection and development use the word *competencies* to talk about what is required by someone to do a good job. The problem is, if you spend a few moments searching the Internet for the word “competencies,” you will find many different meanings. It turns out that this term is the Chameleon of HR and personnel development. Exactly what it means depends on who is using it.

Some people define it as "observable and measurable knowledge and skills." Others define it as "the characteristics that people have and use in ways to perform their jobs." It has also been used to talk about the "expertise, experience, and abilities needed to do a good job." Yet, in spite of its vagueness in meaning, it is a popular and very widely used term in today's organizational world, when talking about identifying, selecting, hiring, developing, and promoting people.

What Am I Really Talking About When I Talk About Competencies?

In this Timely Tip, I am defining the word *competency* as a mixture of natural *talents*, *aptitudes*, *skills*, and *knowledge*. T.A.S.K. is a convenient acronym for defining the word competency:

“T” = “TALENT” “A” = APTITUDE” “S” = “SKILLS” “K” = “KNOWLEDGE”

Each component of competency is present in varying degrees.

Talents

A talent is something you've always been able to do so easily and so naturally that you do not even see it as something special. Others may watch you doing it and say, "Boy, I wish I were as good as you are doing that!" But to you, it's just something you're been able to do all of your life without even thinking about it. In other words, your talent is not something you learned. It's an ability to do something or behave in a certain way that seems to be hardwired into your very being. For example:



- ◆ Even as a child, you have always been completely at ease with a group of strangers and, in fact, often have become the center of attention. You seem to possess an innate talent for relating to people. You do it without even thinking.
- ◆ You are able to make everything beautiful without effort, from decorating your house to arranging a bouquet of flowers to setting the table for a dinner party. You have the talent to be artistic in everything you do. When asked, "Where did you learn to do that?" you simply reply, "I don't know—I've always been able to do that—I guess it just comes naturally to me."

Aptitudes

Aptitude is a kind of “baby talent.” It's a natural characteristic of yours that can be developed and grown into a full-fledged talent. For example:



- ◆ You've always been naturally comfortable with numbers and calculations. You sailed through your math classes in high school without any effort. Then you went to college, earned an MBA degree, and joined the business office of a large retail organization. Over the years, your aptitude with numbers blossomed into a highly developed talent. Now you are the organization's Chief Financial Officer.
- ◆ Since you were four years old and received your first lego set, you've always enjoyed building and fixing things. After years of training and many apprentice experiences, you are now a successful and very talented mechanical engineer.

¹ From: http://www.arniedahlke.com/120129_Build_A_Competency_Culture.pdf . This Timely Tip is based on and partially excerpted from sections in my upcoming book: *Succession Planning for Dummies*, to be published by Wiley & Sons in Spring, 2012. Take a moment to explore my previous Timely Tips at: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>

Skills

When it comes to "skills," we're in an entirely different ballgame. Unlike talents and aptitudes, which are our natural givens, skills are things we do that are learned. Essentially, a skill is a behavior that we develop through training and practice. You can't pour talent into someone. But, you can train people how to develop particular skills. And, every job has certain required skills. For example:



- ◆ You have just acquired a brand-new computer system with a new operating system that holds the promise of providing you with all kinds of fascinating and useful programs, but you really don't know how to operate it. So, you attend a series of weekly training sessions to develop the skills you need to get the most out of your computer system.
- ◆ You would love to build a set of tables for your patio. But, you've never had any experience at doing that. So, you attend a furniture making class in which you learn how to build furniture. You now have the skills to build the tables for your patio.

Knowledge

"Knowledge" refers to the kinds of information people need to know in order to perform their jobs effectively. Required knowledge comes in many shapes and sizes. It may be knowledge about a particular product. It may be knowledge about the capabilities and/or limitations of a particular piece of equipment. It may be knowledge about certain federal or state regulations that must be observed when performing a job. For example:



- ◆ An auto dealer is offering a new model electric car to his customers. Not only is it electric, it comes equipped with all of the latest technology, including a GPS system and a backup sensor. Salespeople need to be very knowledgeable about the new car and all of its wonderful features to be effective at their jobs.
- ◆ State lawmakers have just established some new regulations with regard to hiring and firing employees. It is critical that everyone in the HR department be knowledgeable about those regulations.

Build A Competency Culture

Use T.A.S.K. to maximize the potential for long-term success with your organization by creating a *competency culture*—an organizational culture in which:

- ◆ Everyone is aware of the specific competencies needed to perform his or her job.
- ◆ Everyone is motivated to develop his or her competencies to the highest level.

Start the process by meeting with your CEO and top managers. Then move to meetings with other levels of management and supervisors. Finally, have managers meet with their employees. In these meetings, discuss the *talents, aptitudes, skills, and knowledge*—in other words, the *competencies*—needed to perform each job. Involve everyone in an exploration of needed competencies, from the CEO to the receptionist.



Even though your HR department may already have most of this information, holding these meetings:

- ◆ Focuses everyone on competencies.
- ◆ Encourages people to further develop their competencies.
- ◆ Lets them know that you are offering educational and training activities to help them develop their competencies.

Yes, these meetings will take time, effort, and resources. But in the long run, the information you gather and the message you communicate will help align everyone toward achieving the mission of your organization.

And, there are wonderful side benefits.: Managers and their employees will end up with a mutual set of expectations about how work should be performed. Employees will have a clearer understanding of what their managers expect of them. And, all of this emphasis on individual growth and development will have a positive motivational impact on everyone.

