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# Good Practice Guide

## Competence Frameworks - 10 Lessons Learnt

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### Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TEN LESSONS LEARNT</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Do it back to front!	3
2. It's a competency framework, not a job description....	3
3. Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?	3
4. 'Yes' to one thing, but not the other...	4
5. From 7 to 11	4
6. It's supposed to change....	4
7. I dare you to ask them!	4
8. Can you see what it is yet?	5
9. "If only you knew the power of the Dark Side, Luke"	5
10. Position Vacant: Only Super Man or Wonder Woman need apply	5

## Introduction

This guide is aimed at helping Human Resources practitioners improve the outcomes from talent management processes by providing a robust foundation for their implementation in the shape of a well designed and valid competence framework.

Developing a competency framework can be a costly and lengthy process, especially if you are creating a bespoke model that is genuinely focused on high performance within your organisation. We offer here ten lessons as tips for your own work in this area. This is based on our extensive work and research with public and private sector organisations, large and small.

A Competence Framework can 'come alive' when applied to the business in the context of talent management processes such as performance management, succession planning, high potential identification and development planning.

Your competence framework, combined with our Talent® suite of software products can help you do just that.

This Guide is part of a series - please visit our web site for further resources.

### Our portfolio of Talent® software and services are ideal for:

- Professionalising public sector organisations
- Maturing high growth and medium-sized businesses
- Pioneering divisions of large organisations



## Ten Lessons Learnt

### 1. Do it back to front!

The evaluation of a competency framework is often something that happens (if it happens at all) after the model has been introduced into the organisation and has been applied to assessment, appraisal or 360 degree feedback. However, some fairly radical amendments can emerge from a thorough evaluation and it can be hard to implement such changes once the framework has become embedded in processes. We find that investing in an evaluation before the framework is fully incorporated into the HR toolkit offers two key benefits:

- Increased buy-in through involvement of staff in the evaluation or trialling process
- Time and cost savings by introducing the finished article into HR processes, rather than having to make changes further down the line.

### 2. It's a competency framework, not a job description....

In a recent evaluation process, we found that a number of similar 360 degree questionnaire items did not fit within the factor structure of the underlying competency framework. These items pertained to things like applying environmentally-sound working practices, adhering to relevant legal structures, practising effective financial management and implementing health and safety standards rigorously. When developing a competency framework, it is worth considering the value of including statements referring to requirements of the job (for example, "Manages the environmental impact of their work"). Are these better treated as performance objectives or standards through appraisal? Or are they just part of the job description, code of conduct or company standards?

Competency frameworks tend to work more effectively, and tend to be less complicated, when they focus on the behaviours that set apart the most effective people from the less effective ones, and when they don't comprise of a mix of personal qualities, behaviours, job requirements, 'nice to haves' and 'must haves'.

### 3. Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?

Clearly statements or indicators which work less well as part of an assessment process are those that could be misconstrued, or ambiguous. A common difficulty arises when you have statements that are meant to represent positive behaviours, but which some people might interpret negatively.

Examples of this might be "Takes calculated risks", "Makes decisions using incomplete information when necessary" or "Actively promotes own skills and strengths". All of these could be effective behaviours in the right circumstances and in certain cultures, but could be a no-no in others.

When developing your competency model, test all indicators and behaviours out with representative groups, and remove any that might cause confusion.

#### 4. 'Yes' to one thing, but not the other...

Through evaluation, we often find that the longer and more complex behavioural statements (e.g., those that contain a number of conditions, such as "Uses a range of managerial styles, adapted to suit the situation in order to get the best out of people") are less likely to fit within the competency structure. This may be because people are misunderstanding or misconstruing the statement, or are focusing on one part of the sentence over another.

Wherever possible, keep your behaviour statements short, clear and focused on only one behaviour.

#### 5. From 7 to 11

There is a temptation to create competency models that are perfectly balanced - a nice even number of competencies, each with the same number of indicators or behavioural statements. However, real life doesn't usually work that way and accepting that some of your competencies may be more complex and comprise of more indicators than others can be a positive move.

Of course, each competency needs a reasonable amount of detail in order for it to be assessed consistently and accurately and typically 7 to 11 indicators or statements prove to be sufficient.

#### 6. It's supposed to change....

During the process of developing a competency framework, if you aren't planning on piloting it in some way and evaluating it before launch (but are planning to do it further down the line, when it's been tried and tested in the field), you may need to embrace many of the changes suggested.

The data from an evaluation or live use often suggests that the behaviours are related to each other in quite a different way from the one envisaged by those who created it, who would probably (perhaps unconsciously) have applied their own behavioural constructs and mental models or using competency themes from models they've worked with before.

#### 7. I dare you to ask them!

When carrying out the research for your competency framework, ensure you canvass the views of a wide range of people in different functions. It's easy to draw on sympathetic networks (such as learning and development representatives from across the business, or people in corporate centre roles) when setting up focus groups and expert panels, but this may narrow the focus or result in a framework that is skewed towards a particular type of job.

Making an effort to reach out to unfamiliar groups early certainly eases implementation later and can create advocates in the business.

## 8. Can you see what it is yet?

If you are applying your competency framework to assessment processes such as 360 degree appraisal or selection, ensure that your competencies are defined in terms of what is clearly observable and measurable. If the underlying attitudes, motivations and values of people are also critically important, you need to identify how these would be translated into behaviours that others can observe.

How would you (and others) measure these and therefore make judgements on an individual's performance or strength in this area?

## 9. "If only you knew the power of the Dark Side, Luke"

Some competencies are more easily observed when the person lacks strength or ability in a particular area (for example, 'Self Control' and 'Respects Diversity' can be more obvious by their absence!). In these cases, it can be difficult to express positive behaviours in a meaningful and observable manner.

Consider including contra-indicators which will help people determine what a development need in a particular competency might look like, in behavioural terms.

This reflects Peter Drucker's observation that 'half the leaders he has met don't need to learn anything new, they just need to learn what to stop doing'.

## 10. Position Vacant: Only Super Man or Wonder Woman need apply

Finally, there is always a temptation to include a whole gamut of competencies within a model - once you start researching it can be easy to identify with the importance and value of dozens of competencies and behaviours, but a common mistake is to try to encompass too much in your framework. Focus on just those things that really make a difference, and which are really critical, within your business.

We've seen frameworks with more than 25 competencies, which can be unwieldy, overly complex and confusing. If you want people to use a competency framework effectively and consistently, make it concise, user friendly and not a description of an unattainable ideal.

## Finally...

Head Light Communications can assist you in the implementation of competency and performance assessment and development programmes using our Talent® software technology and supporting consultancy services, including competency design, feedback coaching and training and assessment centres.