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Toward a Competency Model for Directors of Management and Executive Development

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Directors of Management and Executive Development

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In addition to academic programs, many universities across the country offer continuing professional development courses and programs through centers focused on management and executive development. Although these centers fall under the broad umbrella of continuing education, the location of these centers in schools of business or public affairs and their program emphasis on management development cause these centers to differ from traditional divisions of continuing education. The general dividing line between management/executive development and continuing education lies in audience focus and reporting hierarchy within the institution.

Management and executive development focuses more specifically on knowledge and skills needed by mid-level and senior managers where continuing education offers a wide range of courses, such as creative arts, performing arts, computer skills, certificate programs in human resources, and supervisory communication and problem solving skills. These programs usually

report to an academic (degree granting) college; continuing education is usually part of professional studies and does not grant academic degrees. These types of operations share enough in common that two different national conferences are annually conducted specifically for professionals in this field – the Conference on Management and Executive Education and the International University Consortium for Executive Education.

If management/executive education and continuing education centers share similarities in programming, then does it follow that the skills and abilities needed to successfully run such centers might be similar enough to each other and unique enough from traditional continuing education to benefit from a shared list of competencies? Would such a competency model be helpful to those currently running centers and/or interested in such positions?

The authors of this article hypothesized that the answer to both questions is "yes." The authors contend that the success of a center for management/executive development, hereafter referred to as a center, is greatly affected by the competencies of its managers. Since there is precious little literature - none was found in an extensive search - on existing competency models fitting for these managers, we proposed to identify a consensus list of those competencies through an interactive concurrent session at the 2001 Conference on Management

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and Executive Development. We believe that the identification of such a model will serve as a useful self-assessment tool for professional development planning of those currently in the field and may even be of use for university administrators in recruiting professionals to direct these centers. This paper briefly discusses the use of competency models, presents the findings of this initial research effort, and suggests next steps that might be taken to enhance the validity and utility of a model.

We in the field of management and executive development design and deliver programs on leadership, management disciplines and the latest concepts on performance improvement in organizations. We accomplish this by drawing on our own expertise and experience and the expertise of staff, faculty and outside experts. We rarely take a hard look at the underlying competencies that are used to carry out center responsibilities. We tend to focus on "doing" rather than examining the "how." This research effort is a first step, perhaps only a baby step, in developing a competency model that can improve center performance.

ABOUT COMPETENCY MODELS

There is little agreement in the literature on the definition of competencies. Whiddet and Holyforde note that: "Competencies, often misunderstood, differ from competence in that they are concerned with behavior needed to fulfill a task, rather than the outcome. They consider motives, traits, skills, and knowledge." (Widdett and Hollyforde,1999). For the purposes of this paper a competency will be defined as a knowledge, skill, ability, attitude or characteristic associated with high performance on a particular job. A competency model would be the description of those individual competencies that collectively are necessary for successfully accomplishing that job. Such models frequently include descriptions of the performance behaviors that reflect the knowledge, skill, ability

or characteristic. These models are typically identified through questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, etc., with those most familiar with the job in question.

There are both supporters and opponents of the use of competency models. Opponents claim that many such models are often too generic to be of much use, lacking the specificity of performance behavior to serve as a guide or development tool. They also claim that such models are often more focused on past needs rather than future needs and may fail to consider a company's internal strategies.

Supporters believe that such models can be useful in identifying those qualities and factors that lead to high performance, which, in turn, can serve as a useful tool for development and recruitment purposes. They also feel that well-researched models can help focus retention and succession planning efforts.

Over the last several years groups such as the American Society for Training and Development, the American Management Association, and numerous vendors of multi-rater feedback instruments have developed a number of management competency models. Many in the field of management and executive development use these models, or ones they have developed on their own, to drive decisions about their center's courses and customer programming. The authors of this article have also used competency models in their program development efforts.

One of the author's center's general management programs are based on the Master Manager Model developed by Robert E. Quinn. (Quinn,1998). Quinn's Master Manager Model describes eight roles of a manager and he then describes these eight roles in terms of related competencies. This model is used as a framework to develop customized, in-house curriculum. The competencies the company is

planning to develop are then matched with those in the Master Manager model to see what curriculum may already exist to address such needs. This enables the center to offer a client a "modular" approach to competency development if such modules have been developed, and if not, it helps define what type of content would be recommended to meet the competencies the company desires.

Another author's programs are based on management competency models developed through input with the school's primary clients, managers and executives in state government. For example, a recent research effort to identify executive leadership competencies for state agency executives involved more than 50 state agency leaders through a series of focus groups that identified the following as critical competencies for effective leadership in state government: personal effectiveness (defined as a combination of ethical behavior, commitment and passion, caring and respect, desire for learning and personal growth, confidence and optimism), vision, effective interpersonal communications with different internal and external audiences, managing personal and organizational change, managing resources and people, decision making and problem solving, understanding the environment, strategic thinking, and inspiring/motivating others. These core competencies, along with others identified previously for mid-level managers, are used to drive the curriculum design of the school's management and executive programs.

The final author's Executive MBA program has as its core nine managerial competencies that research found are required for successful executive management. A competency model was developed using survey results conducted with 3,500 managers (response rate was 3%) and from focus groups consisting of executives from several industries. An expert panel of outside executives and senior faculty validated the results. The competencies

identified and contained in the curriculum are: leading change; leading with integrity; problem solving and decision making; ability to assess external/internal environments; managing knowledge and knowledge workers; managing technology; communications within the organization and with external constituents; crisis management; and team building. These core competencies are threaded throughout the curriculum so that at the end of the twenty-one month program graduates will have developed in themselves the aforementioned competencies through course work, experiential learning and practice in applying course materials in their own organizations and through class projects with actual firms.

METHODOLOGY USED IN THIS RESEARCH

Following is a description of how a competency model for center directors was identified. The authors have been engaged in the management of executive and management development, collectively, for over twenty-nine years. The methodology for this research effort grew from their collective experience in the field and their continuing participation in the Conference for Management and Executive Development (CMED). All three have served on the CMED Board of Advisors.

The annual CMED conference is attended by approximately 180 people who are engaged in the management, marketing and administration of executive and management development efforts and continuing education at four-year colleges and universities. Over 100 institutions are represented and approximately 55% of attendees are center directors or associate/assistant directors. Data were collected during a concurrent session at the CMED Conference 2001. The twenty-five attendees held positions of directors, associate/assistant directors and center managers.

Participants were invited to take part in an interactive exercise to help identify key competencies for success in leading management and executive development and continuing education programs. In effect, participants in the session served as a highly qualified focus group.

After briefly explaining competency models in general, participants were led through a discussion about differences in centers' missions (described below in "caveats") and then a three-step process to identify competencies. First, they were invited to brainstorm the biggest challenges they currently face as center directors. Next, they were invited to identify the competencies specific to the job of director that would be most critical in successfully addressing these challenges. It was noted that there are a number of general management competency models that define the general competencies of a manager (e.g., communications, supervisory skills, budget, etc.), but that our efforts were an attempt to identify competencies that were unique to successfully running a center. Twenty-five different competencies were identified through this process and placed on flip chart sheets. Finally, priority of importance was established by asking each participant to "vote" for the five competencies he or she felt were most critical to the director's success. The eight competencies described in this paper ranged from a high of eleven votes down to five votes.

Caveats and Cautions

It should be noted that the competencies described in the next section reflect the opinions of only those who attended that concurrent session. No attempt was made to capture or categorize responses by the title of the respondent, although the majority were center directors or associate directors. Those 25 people do not speak for the entire field of management and executive development, but just as obviously because of their experience in the field, they do

provide a good cross-section and represent the perspectives of a number of programs throughout the United States and Canada.

The competencies described certainly contribute to the success of a center through leadership and management skills, but do not suggest exclusive correlation of these competencies to the overall success of a center. The characteristics of success depend on many other factors beyond the scope of this research, such as changing marketplace, buying habits of customer companies, internal politics of institutions housing centers, and other market conditions.

It should also be noted that the center's mission can, and should, have an impact on the competencies perceived as key by those directors. During the session it was explained that an institution's mission should drive the activities, programs and efforts of the center's activities. A discussion of the differences in mission was held with the participants, and while we found that all are in the same general business, there are differences in priorities of elements within missions of centers across the country. The mission elements identified are listed below.

- Make money
- Achieve excellence
- Responsiveness to customers
- Financial self-sufficiency
- Enhance the reputation of the school
- Extend the resources of the university to the outside

Given that different programs have different mission priorities that entail different competency needs, a definitive list of competencies for center directors may not be possible. Having acknowledged that, there is enough overlap in missions to make a list of competencies useful even if not definitive.

Finally, we recognize that there may be a tendency to define the requirements of our jobs in terms of our own personal strengths – "By coincidence, this job calls for skills that exactly match mine!" This is a common, valid weakness of all self-reported data. As a competency model for center managers is refined through further research, it will be helpful to get input from those to whom center directors report as a means for validating competencies necessary for success from a non-director perspective.

COMPETENCIES FOR CENTER DIRECTORS

The following were identified by participants in this study as the most critical competencies needed by directors of centers of management and executive development. Each competency is defined followed by a statement of importance of that competency to center managers. As noted earlier, this list does not preclude nor minimize the importance of other general management competencies. Finally, although these competencies are defined and examined as if they were distinct areas of knowledge and skills, it is important to recognize that as humans we don't exercise any of these competencies in isolation. Skills and abilities in one competency area usually enhance – and are enhanced by – skills in other areas.

Competency:
Curriculum and Program Development

The primary product of management and executive education is programs, which are comprised of curriculum. Thus, competencies in developing curriculum and programs are critical to the success of a center.

Behaviors, skills and practices in this competency area include the ability to assess needs, identify learning outcomes linked to those needs, design appropriate program content and methods of delivery, identify and incorporate strategies to enhance transfer of learning, and

assess program effectiveness in a way that iteratively improves the curriculum and program development process.

The absence of these skills would make quality control of a center's programs much more difficult, if not impossible.

Competency: Knowledge of Adult Learning

For the competency area of adult learning, it is important to understand the principles and theories of how adults learn best. This knowledge enables one to assess the appropriateness of curriculum design and delivery. This knowledge enhances – but is distinct from – the competencies of curriculum design and program development.

For example, a person knowledgeable in adult learning knows that adults learn best when they perceive a need to learn and are involved in the learning process. Accordingly, programs designed with this knowledge in mind will include exercises both to identify the "felt" need of participants and to give participants a "hands-on" experience in using the information or skills being taught.

Management and executive development by definition is delivered to adults. The subtleties in learning styles between the adult learner and normal college students require careful planning by program developers and faculty.

Competency: Marketing

Competencies in marketing include understanding the interrelationships of the marketing principles of product, price, place and promotion as well as understanding the needs of the intended audience. It may not be critical to a director's success that he or she personally knows how to design a website or to graphically create an award-winning promotional brochure, but knowledge of the use and purpose of

promotional methods and mediums and how those are part of the marketing strategy probably is critical to one's success.

Marketing is a significant contributing factor to the success of a cost-recovery center. A cogent, well thought out and administered marketing plan is paramount. Competency in marketing is one of the most important competencies required for a center's growth and ultimate success.

Competency: Close sales

Sales are defined as contact with potential customers that result in participants (students) enrolling in management and/or executive development programs, or signing a contract with a company for training development and delivery. This skill involves understanding the needs of current and potential clients, successfully articulating how the center's services can address those needs, overcoming objections of the client, and gaining the enrollment or contract.

Closing the sale is dependent on and follows a good marketing plan. Sales is the process that actually books new business. Center directors quite often are called in to make the final sale, especially for important, high-level executives. As such they must be competent in sales. Moreover, they must also be able to manage and lead sales staff in their centers.

Competency: Skill in understanding and successfully navigating internal and external politics

Internal politics include the informal relationships of a university/college's internal stakeholders including administration, faculty, staff and supporting organizations (catering, contracting, etc.). External politics include the informal relationships between the center and its outside stakeholders, such as students, program attendees, supporting companies, government agencies and industry groups.

It is important that a center director be able to "read" and understand the impact that internal and external politics have or might have on their center and their institution, and understand the power and authority structures in each. Most decisions affecting a center's strategic direction and operations are steeped in these informal relationships. Success, or failure, can be dramatically affected by the informal relationships between a center and its internal and external stakeholders.

Competency: Adaptability

Adaptability is having the patience, tolerance, and ability to bridge the gap between business and education. It is also being open to different perspectives, willingness to compromise, and flexibility in one's own views.

Center directors often deal with ambiguity and frequently have to translate between the viewpoints of external customers and internal constituents of the university/college. Educators often do not understand the subtleties of the business world, and those in business and government often do not understand the workings of education institutions. Center directors must be adaptable, tolerant and be able to translate business requirements and environments to educators and faculty who are developing programs, and then ensure program design meets the requirements of the business client.

Competency: Run a profit center

Successfully running a profit center involves the activities and actions required to ensure that revenues exceed expenses.

Although technically most centers are housed in non-profit educational institutions, this

does not mitigate the requirement that revenue coming into the center must exceed expenses. Most centers operate on a "profit center model." Thus, it is extremely important that center directors understand accounting processes for revenue and expenses. Skill and finesse are required to "negotiate" with university/college administration on budgets, revenue sharing and contributions to college and university causes.

Competency: Entrepreneurial risk taking

This competency involves the knowledge and experience needed to manage the risk associated with start-up business activities. Management and executive program development is constantly changing as the business environment changes. New programs and new customers are the lifeblood of a center. A center operates much like a start-up business, requiring entrepreneurial spirit and focus. By contrast the more traditional activities of a university or college tends to be managed in a more bureaucratic manner that may not adapt or change with the same speed needed for success of centers that are competing in a dynamic marketplace. Center directors often must operate beyond the safety net of the bureaucratic structure, which by its very nature requires skill in defining and managing acceptable risk.

Competency: Understanding organizational development and behaviors

Organizational behavior involves the activities and actions of the institution's internal constituents (executives, managers, supervisors and workers). Organizational development is a set of aligned activities, usually in the form of coaching, training, systems analysis, education and work experiences, that recognize the interrelationship of people, processes and structure that collectively affect the achievement of the organization's purpose and goals.

Management and executive development is all about developing people, i.e., executives, managers and supervisors who lead, direct and manage an organization's activities. These management actions and behaviors are greatly influenced by the organizational systems and processes in place. Center directors must have competencies in translating organizational requirements into programs that will improve the performance of its customers (executives, managers and supervisors) within their organizational environments. In addition, center directors are responsible for their own center's organizational development.

USING THIS COMPETENCY MODEL

Competency models for management and executive institutions can provide the following benefits:

- Professional and personal development for center directors.
- Succession planning for center personnel
- Center staffing, hiring and personnel development
- Center personnel assessment and evaluation.

Although all four of these benefits are important, a primary use of this model is a development-planning tool for those currently leadings centers. One might take the following steps in using such a tool.

Step 1: assess the importance of each listed competency to the overall success of your job

Step 2: add any other key competencies important to the overall success of your job that are not already identified under "Key Competencies."

Step 3: using a five-point scale, assess your level of skill for each of the competencies on the scale entitled "My Skills."

Step 4: for each of the competencies that are rated both as somewhat to very important and rated as a lower level of skill, identify strategies for developing or acquiring those skills or competencies.

Note that as is the case with all self-assessment instruments, the assessment is only as good as one's ability to accurately see one way others do. With that in mind, it is often helpful to get feedback from other stakeholders (e.g., direct reports, peers, supervisors, customers, etc.) about the importance of and the personal levels of skills of each of these competencies.

NEXT STEPS

The research described herein is only an initial effort to identify a competency model for center directors. More work is needed. Specifically, regarding center director professional development we recommend a continuous process of collecting feedback on the appropriateness of these competencies from a much larger sample of those currently in the field, and expand or edit the model, as the new data would suggest.

Collect feedback on needed competencies from other key stakeholders in this process in addition to center directors. These would include the administrators to whom these directors report and key clients/customers of such centers. Again, expand or edit the model as this feedback would suggest.

A center's success can only be achieved through the expert leadership and management of the center director and his or her staff. A director's competencies will dictate success or failure. Thus, it is critically important that better, more robust competency models be developed for those who are responsible for management and executive development and continuing education centers.

References

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