



## Fostering Stakeholder Support When Developing a Competency Model

By Kelly Cano

As the federal sector embraces a competency-based approach to human capital management, more federal agencies will undoubtedly initiate efforts to develop customized competency models and assessment tools. The responsibility of developing a competency model from scratch can appear somewhat daunting, especially to the HR professional managing such a sizeable initiative. However, the appropriate level of stakeholder support and involvement can make all the difference between a discarded inventory of KSAs and a useful, lasting competency model.

Stakeholder support is crucial to the planning, development and implementation stages of any organization's competency model; however, it is a component that is easily overlooked. Here are seven things the HR professional should consider in order to achieve stakeholder commitment throughout the duration of such a project.

### 1. Identify stakeholders and level of support required.

According to *Competency-Based HR Applications: Results of a Comprehensive Survey*, by Stephen C. and Helen Schoonover, Donald Nemerov and Christine Ehly (Falmouth, MA: Schoonover, Arthur Andersen and SHRM, 2000), a major reason for the unsuccessful implementation of competency systems is the lack of support from stakeholders. In order to gain commitment to a competency model from key players both inside and outside of the organization, stakeholders must be identified in the early planning stages of the project.

Before any steps are taken to create the competency model itself, make a list of both internal and external stakeholders and the level of support required of each throughout all phases of the project. For example, you may need to conduct a set of interviews with the first line managers of an organization in order to collect initial data on competency requirements, but you may also need to follow up with the same managers during the final stages of the project to make sure their feedback was accurately captured in the model. Also, remember to be as accurate and realistic as possible when indicating the time and effort each stakeholder will have to spend on the development of the competency model so as not to overwhelm them with unanticipated or impractical work requirements. This critical planning step will help to keep all stakeholders in compliance with their commitments to the development and implementation of the model.

## **2. Understand and communicate project purpose and outcomes.**

Before your stakeholders can commit to a specific project plan, they must first understand the rationale for initiating the project and the anticipated end results. First, make sure that your purpose for developing a competency model is clearly documented. In addition, be able to identify the model's intended uses and benefits to the organization. Remember, it is important to be realistic about project outcomes in order to avoid raising stakeholder expectations about unattainable goals, products or results. Once you have an understanding of the purpose and outcomes of the project, consider introducing your stakeholders to the project by briefing them on these topics. When stakeholders are clearly informed of the aim of the project, they are likely to build upon their commitment to the competency model.

## **3. Identify a champion to encourage stakeholder support.**

It is crucial that you identify a project champion who can help you encourage continuous stakeholder support for the competency model. This individual is usually a stakeholder (although it is possible to identify more than one project champion) who is highly involved with and committed to the project. The project champion reiterates the need for and the benefits of the competency model to other stakeholders. Too often stakeholders can become skeptical of project outcomes, especially if the resulting competency model is linked to employee performance appraisals or pay. Project champions must be knowledgeable and dedicated to the project in order to quell any false rumors that may be circling about its intended uses. A good project champion will also encourage stakeholders to maintain their involvement in the project, which will, in turn, help to ensure the development of a high-quality competency model.

## **4. Provide background information relevant to the project.**

As the meaning of the term "competency" continues to evolve, it is important that your stakeholders agree on a single definition of the word before you begin to develop a competency model. This is just one example of how you can provide your stakeholders with background information that is relevant to the project. According to authors David D. Dubois' and William J. Rothwell's book, *Competency-Based Human Resource Management* (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing, 2004), there are two main interpretations of the term competency: "One school of thought maintains that competency implies knowledge or skill. The second interprets competency as any characteristic that supports performance" (pg. 19). Still others understand competencies to mean the job-related behaviors of an individual. As you can see, it is easy for a stakeholder—even one who is fully aware of the requirements of his or her organization, to struggle with the meaning, wording and level of specificity of a competency. Regardless of how you choose to define competency, the important thing is that you provide your stakeholders with a brief background on competencies and encourage the group to come to a consensus on a definition. Providing a background will lay the foundation for a consistent model and will prevent confusion among the stakeholders.

## **5. Organize a competency model.**

There are many accessible resources that can be drawn on to develop a competency model. One resource is the [OPM Web site](#), which offers several standard competency

definitions that can be tailored to fit the needs of your organization. Another resource is *The Art and Science of Competency Models: Pinpointing Critical Success Factors in Organizations*, by Anntoinette D. Lucia and Richard Lepsinger, which provides a comprehensive but concise look at the various ways in which you can structure a competency model to best suit the needs of your organization. If you are developing a model from scratch, it is a good idea to organize an outline from which your stakeholders can begin to work. This will help you to use your stakeholders' time and effort wisely and will make the most difficult writing-intensive stage of developing a competency model run more smoothly.

#### **6. Be flexible.**

It is important to remember to be flexible when working with stakeholders to create a competency model. Do not approach your stakeholders with a predetermined methodology for developing the model because no single methodology is suitable for all organizations. It is better to first listen to the expressed needs and suggestions of your stakeholders and then agree on a proposed project plan and approach as a group. This will make your stakeholders feel that their feedback is being used to inform each stage of the project, which will, in turn, make them more likely to participate in *all* stages of the project. Also, be aware that as your stakeholders spend more time with the various iterations of a competency model, they may find that changing the structure or another characteristic of the model will meet the needs of the organization more fully. Know that your original plan will probably change several times, and that these changes, even last-minute ones, often result in a more viable and widely-supported product.

#### **7. Communicate continuously.**

Perhaps the most effective way to foster stakeholder support during the development of a competency model is to maintain the flow of communication throughout the duration of the project. Make sure that stakeholders are well informed of the tasks, deliverables, deadlines and milestones of the project. Weekly bulletins, e-mails, newsletters, brown bag lunches and town halls are excellent channels of communication through which stakeholders can stay abreast of the project's progress. Finally, do not attempt to create a competency model in solitude. Keep stakeholders engaged by requesting their feedback as often as practicable and by incorporating their input into the model. This will not only help to maintain the support of your stakeholders throughout the length of the project, but it will also ensure a uniquely customized competency model that is more likely to be implemented and supported by the organization as a whole.

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