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For Workplace News

Remember what they used to tell us kids when we went down to the swimming hole? Always check to see what's under the water before diving in. Unfortunately, when it comes to competencies, most companies don't look very deep.

Fifteen years ago it was tough selling decision makers on the link between the success of an employee and the behaviours they exhibited. The real concern, people felt, was for business results. As far as prediction and measurement went, traditional performance indicators did the job just fine.

As market and talent competition heated up, the value of competencies became more clear. Here was a chance to align employee behaviour with organizational culture and strategy and achieve an edge where it counts — with people. Today, many organizations have embraced competencies as the standard for employee measurement, using them throughout the employment life cycle.

The problem is the majority of companies have not been able to develop a competency system that is behaviourally based and linked to corporate strategy and values.

How come? Well, it can cost a lot in terms of time, money and

resources to define competencies internally. So when consultants come along with a ready-to-use, off-the-shelf priced-to-sell system of competency terms and descriptions, most decision makers are only too eager to take the supposedly easy way out.

One human resources leader saw the result when she moved to a competitor. Her new organization had a very unique culture, one that had been written about in prestigious magazines and newspapers. She was looking forward to capturing that uniqueness in unifying its competency models for locations and divisions around the world.

As things stood, however the position of manager in her new organization was described almost exactly as in her old organization as well as in a third company she had once benchmarked. Not surprisingly, all three had hired the same consultant.

Despite her best efforts, she could not convince senior managers to consider revamping those descriptions. The pressure was on, instead, to develop a more meaningful succession-planning program. But if the competency descriptions used as the basis for that wasn't capturing what it really took to succeed within this unique culture, and aligned to the essence of their values, how meaningful could the end result be?

Senior executives hold the following logic: if there are only a

finite number of different types of behaviours characteristic of any one job, how many different ways can there be to describe them? Communication is communication. Teamwork is teamwork. A focus on results is, of course, a focus on results. You know what we mean, right?

Unfortunately, we end up with a kind of modern Tower of Babel. Sure, we're all using the same words, but are we talking the same language?

Believe me, teamwork in an automotive plant does not involve the same behaviours or values as teamwork in a government agency.

I wish my HR friend's story was an isolated one, but it's riot. Too many organizations are not going deep enough with their competency descriptions. They are either using stock or externally "benchmarked" competency dictionaries, or not being rigorous enough with their language in making those competencies behavioural, or forgoing the process of basing them on organizational culture and values.

What results does not hold managers to execute strategy or achieve results help human resources to implement meaningful people systems, or employees to understand what's required of them to excel.

Here are a few basic considerations when writing or developing your own competency descriptors:

Develop competencies through detailed employee and key stakeholder input. Base them on organizational values;

Write your own descriptions without adapting them from outside sources;

Use the behaviours of top performers who demonstrate the right values as your guide. Do not focus on status quo performers;

Define behaviours positively and realistically. Make sure they are truly valued by the organizational culture, not just wishful thinking; and

Beware of competency statements that begin with words like: demonstrates, willingly, sometimes, frequently, etc., because these words are not behaviours.

Remember this: clearly defined behavioural competency statements support what is key to your organization's strategy and culture. By creating widespread understanding of the concrete language of success, you ensure employees know and support the right way to do a job.

Build your competency system through extensive participation. Share the results openly. Recognize and celebrate top performers who exhibit those behaviours in achieving results. Focus on the positive during performance reviews.

In the process, you will develop a language that everyone can speak and understand, a depth of knowledge about what your organization needs to do to succeed that will be a source of common strength on your way to achieving the desired business results. ●

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