

Constructing Competencies Creates Construction Consistency

By Kris Marchini, Ayanne Levy, and Sidney Chase

Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

Setting

Building Blocks, Inc. (a pseudonym) is a construction company that has grown exponentially, increasing from 200 to 1,100 employees in five years. Historically, the company encourages each superintendent to use one's own ideas and skill set to complete projects in lieu of establishing company-wide procedures.

The Request

Each superintendent hired brings individual behaviors and work methods, contributing to inconsistency in schedule management. This has resulted in numerous missed project deadlines. The superintendent employee review includes scheduling performance; however performance standards are not defined. In light of these issues, Building Blocks recognized the importance of establishing consistent procedures, drawing on the behaviors, skills, and knowledge of its exemplary superintendents, and requested us, a team of graduate students at Boise State University, to conduct a competency-based needs assessment.

The Approach

The competency-based needs assessment examined high performing superintendents (exemplars) and identified critical behaviors, knowledge, and skills that guided development of a competency model.

We used Langdon's Language of Work (LOW) model (Langdon & Marrelli, 2002) to define the previously undefined competencies required for the scheduling job function. This model "provides the basis for defining jobs so that we can then build a system for identifying competencies" (p. 17). The LOW model is comprised of "four sources [that] contribute to the development of performance-based competencies" (p. 18). These sources are behavior plus attributes, standards, work support, and human relations. Langdon and Marrelli describe behavior as the integration of inputs, conditions, process steps, outputs, consequences, and feedback (p. 18).

We collected data using open-ended and semi-structured interviews with exemplar performers and company executives. The data collected provided Building Blocks with useful information to develop standardized procedures specifically related to the process of schedule creation and updating. Once the scheduling job function was defined, the LOW model was used to develop specific competencies for the job function. We created a competency model for Building Blocks' use in identifying performance gaps between exemplar performers and other performers, as well as to align business objectives between superintendents, project teams, core processes, and operations.

Findings

Thirty-five competencies were found to be critical to creating and updating a construction schedule. The majority of competencies fall within four key areas of the needs assessment model: Process Steps, Attributes, Job Standards, and Human Relations. The top three competencies necessary for exemplary performance are Organizational Awareness, Communication, and Planning, followed closely by Impact and Influence, Relationship Building, and Building Strategic Working Relationships (see Figure 1). Analysis of competency domains showed that superintendent competencies are more tactical than strategic within their business focus. Interpersonal skills prevail over intrapersonal skills, and autocratic and democratic leadership styles are equally balanced.

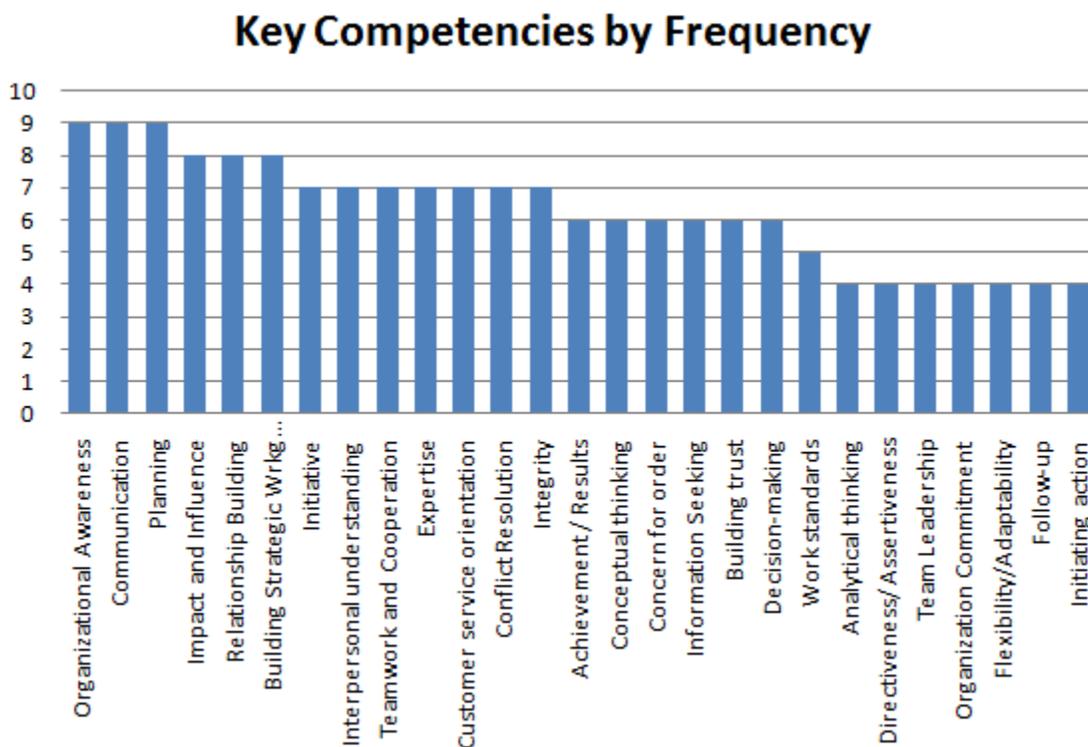


Figure 1: Key Competencies by Frequency

Recommendations

Based on the findings, we provided the following recommendations to Building Blocks:

- Develop a standardized set of schedule creation and update procedures and a tactical training program focused on development of competencies. Use the competency model to revamp hiring and recruiting documents to focus on necessary competencies.
- Create a committee charged with creating a strategic plan whose members possess competencies as outlined in the LOW model. Implement a strategic training program focused on those competencies and actively communicate the company's strategic plan and corporate philosophy.

- Develop job descriptions based on the competency model and develop and/or modify current recruiting and hiring processes to focus on required skills and competencies. Modify the current superintendent employee review to include competencies identified in the model. Conduct a gap analysis of individual superintendents and develop and implement individual employee development plans to close competency gaps.

Lessons Learned

One of the most profound lessons learned was the need to select the correct model for the desired result. Model selection is crucial, as it is the lens through which the needs assessment is conducted. We began with a model that was more geared to performance gap analysis as opposed to the LOW model that helps capture behavioral details needed to ascertain competencies. Initially, we could not identify a strategy to produce the requested competency deliverables, indicating that our initial model selection may be incorrect. Further examination of required deliverables led us to change models. Once we identified the appropriate model, the process, and subsequent data products were aligned with the identified problems and we were able to meet the client's needs.

Another critical lesson learned pertained to project scope. Our focus was limited to one function of the superintendent's job. Competencies were identified from that limited perspective. During data analysis, we were surprised that some of the seemingly obvious competencies for the superintendent role were not as prominent, while others were more prominent than expected. Periodically re-examining project scope validated our process, tools, and plan, enabling accurate data collection, coding, and competency development.

Finally, we learned that success comes from faith in a process that at times seems chaotic and is inherently messy. We had to suspend our attachment to order and trust in the models and the experts that created them.

References

Langdon, D., & Marrelli, A. (2002). A new model for systematic competency identification. *Performance Improvement, 41*(4), 16-23.

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