

# A PERFORMANCE ALTERNATIVE TO COMPETENCY MODELING

I've yet to run across an organization that doesn't want competent people. When I ask what this means, the range of responses is astonishing: knowledgeable; highly skilled in what they do; experienced; the right values; a combination of knowledge, skills and characteristics that leads to high achievement.

Try it yourself — ask your senior managers and see what you get.

The diversity of definitions for "competent" and the varied understandings of this key term often lead to time-wasting, costly activities and elaborate competency models that don't result in desired performance.

## CUTTING THROUGH THE COMPETENCY CLUTTER

Let's begin by defining terms. Competence is generally accepted as the possession of required skills, knowledge capacity and/or qualification to perform a specific job. A competent person, therefore, is one who possesses required competencies.

Note the use of "required" — competencies always are defined in terms of the job. This differs from skills, which refer to the ability to do something well. You define skills in terms of the person. In the workplace, you try to match the job-required competencies with people-possessed skills.

What emerges when you put it all together is an effort to determine what a job demands for high performance, an assessment of what people possess and a pairing of the two. In principle, this should deliver the best candidates available for the job. In practice, less than perfection occurs.

Think of someone you know who was recently fired. Was it because

of insufficient knowledge, skills or experience? Or was it because of his or her characteristics or personal traits? By far, the majority of firings are linked to the latter. If that's the case, should characteristics not be an essential element in hiring?

**I view competencies as nothing more than hypotheses or beliefs that having these will lead to desired performance.**

Is your head hurting by now? Competency modeling can become a quagmire of ambiguity and incompleteness. It can lead you down a never-ending path.

Rather than begin with competencies, why not start with performance itself? I view competencies as nothing more than hypotheses or beliefs that having these will lead to desired performance.

To paraphrase Thomas Gilbert, performance is valued accomplishment derived from costly behavior (all behavior is a cost).

I propose abandoning the competency trail and focusing on performance, derived from the best practices of best practitioners. Identify your exemplary performers — those who achieve the top results with the least drain on resources. Analyze their successes. Observe them in action. Interview them and their supervisors.

With them, create a job model of success. Focus on accomplishments. Start with the overall accomplishment. For example, if you're looking at an auto salesperson, it would be making a successful sale. Break this down into

smaller, contributing performances such as building productive prospect lists and developing effective referral systems. Drill down each of these into smaller performance enablers.

For each enabler, create a performance map, drawing from top performers what contributes to successful outcomes (essential inputs, tools, resources, key tactics, bear traps). Based on these performance maps,



## About the author

Harold D. Stolovitch, Ph.D., is a principal of HSA Learning & Performance Solutions LLC and is emeritus professor of instructional and performance technology at the Université de Montréal. He can be reached at [editor@TalentMgt.com](mailto:editor@TalentMgt.com).

develop assessment instruments to determine where existing and prospective job incumbents reside.

## PERFORMANCE VERSUS COMPETENCY MODELING

Performance modeling begins with desired, measurable outcomes. It then works backward, identifying contributing accomplishments and related activities. Competency modeling begins with experts defining superior performance, sampling the behaviors of successful performers and then developing hypotheses about the competencies, however these are defined.

Performance modeling derives from best practices. It is empirically based — no hypotheses and no ambiguities. It is founded on successful performance.

That's a sound approach to achieving the highly desired performance goal. **TM**