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PANEL

AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO DEVELOPING MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES

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ABSTRACT

In 1977, the American Management Associations undertook a research project to answer the question of what individual characteristics lead to effective managerial performance. The research was based on a sample of 2,000 managers in a variety of jobs and organizations. It identified eighteen skill competencies generic to middle level management. These competencies were found to differentiate the superior from poor and/or average performers and to be causally related to effective management.

The American Management Associations' Competency Program is based on this model of competent managers. Participants begin with a one-week assessment. Their performance in the assessment process is recorded on video or audiotape and analyzed by trained coders. Six weeks later, the participants return to receive extensive feedback. Significant time is spent in sessions planning for development of the competencies. The focus of this demonstration will be how competencies may be developed using experiential techniques. A six-step competency acquisition process will be described and demonstrated.

THE ISSUE OF COMPETENCY

In a 1979 report on competency, George O. Klemp, Jr. wrote, "Competence of a person is judged by his or her performance~ It does not matter whether the individual is a lawyer, skilled worker or philosopher; a competent worker is one who can meet or surpass performance standards either implicit or explicit. In the world of education a truly competency based curriculum is designed to insure that graduates can perform acceptably in their chosen occupation (1)." But what exactly is a competency and how do we know if a person is competent? Richard Boyatzis, president of McBer and Company, defines competency as "an underlying characteristic of a person that leads to effective and/or superior performance (2). This is a characteristic of the person indicating that the individual has a specific capability within a personal repertoire of behaviors. It refers to one's potential for effective performance, not to one's accumulated knowledge.

For example, when customers enter a store looking for a salesperson, they cannot determine by looking around at the various sales people present the one who is best able to handle the job. In fact, there is no sure way to recognize that a person is competent until some behavior has been communicated. Performance of these behaviors does not represent the competency but rather gives evidence from which it may be inferred that the competency is present. The competency is that potential to respond, inherent within the individual, that may be demonstrated by a variety of different behaviors which, taken together, constitute a skill. A given job may require both technical expertise (job-

specific competencies) as well as generic competencies (those common to all jobs in a given category). "For example consider the job of the gas station attendant...if you ask the owner or the customer at the gas station what makes the difference between an attendant who does the job well and one who should be fired, he or she will mention characteristics such as honesty, friendliness, reliability and the ability to service several customers at once without delay. Competencies that underlie such observable aspects of performance are very different from and more complex than the competencies that relate to the functions of the job; yet we must search for, teach and assess these competencies if they are to be tied to broader life and work outcomes. Possession of task related competencies is important to meeting minimal performance standards but by itself is not sufficient for overall effectiveness (1)." This suggests that there are competencies which are job related and which have to do very specifically with completion of tasks. There are also competencies that are generic, or of a kind common to diverse groups in a given category of jobs (i.e. management). Both are necessary to be effective and/or superior in a job.

THE RESEARCH

McBer and Company, a Boston-based behavioral research firm, used a Job Competency Assessment method to generate the data for the study. Re-analyzing data from 2,000 practicing managers in a variety of different jobs and organizations, McBer relied on the Behavioral Event Interview (a variation on the Critical Incident Interview) as a major source of the data. The objective of the research was to identify those behaviors that differentiated superior from average managerial performance.

The research contained four major steps. It first identified a criterion sample from twelve different organizations and forty one different managerial positions. The companies used their own criteria of evaluation including output measures, supervisory ratings and peer nominations to identify a sample consisting of some poor, average and superior performance. The second step in the research was to determine what people actually did as managers. Each of the managers was asked to describe in great detail exactly what he or she did on the job through the Behavioral Event Interview (2). The third step in the research was to identify the characteristics descriptive of the behavior that differentiated superior from average and poor performers. Clusters of similar behaviors emerged. These were grouped, named and identified as the managerial competencies. The fourth step in the research was to find out in what ways these competencies were predictive of superior performance. A discriminate function analysis was utilized. The results were especially strong, considering that they cut across organizations and

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

positions of many different types. The resulting eighteen competencies were identified to be those generic competencies causally related to superior performance on the job. Effective performance depends, however, on the ability to use the appropriate competency mediated by job-specific tasks and environmental norms, climate and demand. The resulting model of managerial effectiveness clustered into five groups of competencies defined as follows:

The Competencies

Goal and Action Management Cluster - This cluster deals with the manager's initiative, image, problem solving skills and goal orientation.

Efficiency Orientation
Proactivity
Concern with Impact
Diagnostic Use of Concepts

Directing Subordinates Cluster This cluster involves a manager's freedom of expression both in times of giving directives and orders, as well as giving feedback to help develop subordinates.

Use of Unilateral Power
Developing Others
Spontaneity

Human Resources Management Cluster - Managers with these competencies have positive expectations about others; have realistic views of themselves, build networks or coalitions with others to accomplish tasks, and stimulate cooperation and pride in work groups.

Use of Socialized Power
Managing Group Process
Positive Regard
Perceptual Objectivity
Accurate Self-Assessment
Self-Control
Stamina and Adaptability

Leadership Cluster - This cluster represents a manager's ability to discern the key issues, patterns or objectives in an organization, and then to conduct him or herself and communicate in a strong fashion.

Self-Confidence
Conceptualization
Logical Thought
Use of Oral Presentations

Specialized Knowledge Cluster

Accounting
Economics
Finance
Management
Marketing

It should be noted that the results of the research found that some specialized knowledge is necessary to be effective but the exact nature of that knowledge was not defined. ANA made the decision to include parts of the common body of knowledge from the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business until that time when the specialized knowledge cluster is better defined. Future research in that area is presently being considered.

HOW CAN A COMPETENCY BE DEVELOPED?

The goal of the Competency Program is to help participants learn the skills and knowledge falling into the clusters defined above. While many management models concentrate on teaching or educating for job tasks rather than on developing a specific individual's competencies, the AMA competency model is unique in that the focus is on the person in the context of the job. The question most frequently asked is, can competencies be learned? We believe it is possible to do so, using a structured learning experience, The Competency Acquisition Process. (2) The process includes the following steps:

- Recognition
Recognition of the competency when one sees it
- Understanding
Understanding how the competency relates to managerial performance
- Assessment
Measurement to determine to what degree the competency is possessed
- Experimentation
Trying new behaviors
- Practice
Using the competency on the job
- Application
Consistent use of the competency on the job appropriate to the context

The simulation takes each participant through the first five steps in the process by concentrating on the competency, Perceptual Objectivity.

Recognition Phase

The competency Perceptual Objectivity is indicated by persons being relatively objective about others not limited in view by excessive subjectivity or personal biases. A person demonstrating this competency in a specific situation, event or assessment unit exhibits the following behaviors:

- a. Is able to describe another person's point of view when it is different from his or her own.
- b. Can describe the different points of view provided by two parties in a conflict.
- c. Can express regrets about another person's loss of status or injured feelings resulting from actions taken for the good of the organization.

The competency, once defined, is illustrated by numerous examples, both video and audio, as well as descriptions of participants who have successfully used this particular competency in the program. Additionally, behavioral characteristics of people who are able to use this competency effectively are described in great detail. The trait level, self image and social role is also discussed. Skills

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

associated with Perceptual Objectivity are clarified. This part of the process is basically didactic including definitions, examples and questions and answers from the participants.

Understanding Phase

The understanding of the competency is further facilitated by discussing it with those present. This is accomplished by asking specific questions that will help the group focus on the nature of the competency. For example, participants are asked to think of a time when this competency was called for on their job and used successfully, or to think of a time when the competency was called for on their job but was not used. They are then asked to explain what they learned from this exercise about themselves and about the competency. Other stimulus questions used are: How does the presence or absence of this competency affect the success of your behavior as a manager? What is the impact of this competency on others? Through extensive discussions and input from those present, further understanding of the nature of this competency is facilitated.

Assessment Phase

During the actual competency program, participants are assessed through specifically designed exercises that stimulate their use of the competencies. During the simulation, however, no such opportunity is available. Therefore, the assessment will be a self-assessment. Each participant will be asked to evaluate his or her ability to use this competency on the job. They will be asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 7, answering the question, "How much of this competency do you feel is required for use on your job at the present time?" They will then be asked to re-analyze themselves on a scale of 1 to 7 which measures where they feel they stand currently with respect to this competency. The resulting discrepancy between the ideal of where they would like to be and the reality of where they are is an extremely powerful motivating technique for use in competency developments. Self-assessment is an essential first step in the process. Although objective assessment instruments are used, it is important that the individual participants come to terms with exactly where they are and how they feel the assessment instrument has analyzed their behavior. In essence, the participants must integrate the objective feedback with their own self-assessment in order to achieve a consistency in their judgment of themselves. Without such awareness, a crucial and essential step would be omitted and little progress could actually be made. The assessment step, then, must be completed before proceeding to any of the other steps in the process.

Experimentation Phase

Experimentation is a process of trying new behaviors. Participants in the simulation will be asked to work in dyads on the competency Perceptual Objectivity. They will be asked to discuss with one another the times that the competency was called for on their jobs and was not used, and the times the competency was called for and used. They will be asked to identify techniques that were effective and to plan how they can effectively and efficiently implement this competency in their present position. Basically this is a time of experimenting with new behaviors, of identifying and planning what techniques can be helpful in applying the competency on the job. It

is a time of planning to the point of scripting the exact words to be used. Experimenting in these structured circumstances allows the participants the freedom of a psychologically safe environment away from the job in which they are able to experiment with new behaviors. There is little threat of being in an environment where old patterns are essentially established and accepted.

Practice Phase

This is a time in which participants in the simulation can actually rehearse and role play the competency. They are asked to select a time that they expect will come up in the near future on their job where this competency (Perceptual Objectivity) will be called for. With their partner in the dyad, they assign roles and discuss the setting, circumstances surrounding it, what each participant will be thinking and feeling. They actually role play it, practicing techniques and strategies discussed earlier with their partner. Their partner is asked to evaluate what has happened during the role play and to share feelings and thoughts about the process. Although this can be done in dyads, it is also very effective in groups of up to 5 or 6 people. A focus on small groups here is especially important in that it allows the participants to have an opportunity to role play their specific behaviors and allows for the intimacy and security of a smaller group. Participants should therefore leave with specific techniques for using the competency on the job and the ability to plan the steps in the actual Competency Acquisition Process: Plan and form strategies, rehearse, role-play, evaluate, reset goals.

CONCLUSIONS

Although a method has been presented here for developing competencies, it is only a part of the picture. When competency development is facilitated at the Institute for Management Competency, there are additional steps not discussed which include planning for competency development when the participants are not on sites. Those processes will not be discussed in the simulation, but are nevertheless an integral part of competency development. What has been presented here is the research upon which the program is based and an on-site method of competency practice and development.

REFERENCES

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