

Kim's response to a LinkedIn post questioning the value of competencies

I'm not sure I'm following your arguments, Matthew, but please allow me to pose some questions and my personal POV about competencies.

1. You say that competencies are inherently limiting due to their "proscriptive" nature and don't provide a way to help people improve their ability...

Well, let's start by defining "competency." I prefer a broad view:

Competencies are skills, knowledge, attitudes, abilities – any observable and measurable characteristic that can be learned and that contributes to success on the job.

Competencies are the enablers of good performance, and it's important that we have a way to talk about those enablers. Competencies provide a common vocabulary for coaching and development. A competency model (or framework or success profile or whatever you want to call it) can help us focus on what's particularly important for a given context. Competencies are not, in my view, in any way proscriptive. A competency model does not imply it's the end-all and be-all for a particular situation – it's only to provide focus. Likewise, having a language is not proscriptive. If you and I want to share recipes, it's useful to use the same terms to describe the ingredients and processes for combining and cooking those ingredients. Labeling the ingredients doesn't limit how I use them in a recipe.

2. You find fault with SME-constructed competencies models, and here I happen to agree with you. Expertise is transparent to most experts, and that's only one of many issues that arise when facilitating a focus group with SMEs. Expertise is, by definition, rare. When I ask an SME to share expertise, there can be an inherent threat in the request, i.e., SMEs may perceive their value will be diminished because they're parting with their expertise – this is a potential problem. Also, SMEs tend to be motivated by status – by being perceived as the experts. A focus group consisting of SMEs can sometimes feel like a burlap sack full of bobcats. That said, SMEs are great at critiquing competency models. They like to prove you wrong and establish their expertise, so you can use that to your advantage. Anyway, this point might be a good start of another thread.
3. You propose a "new approach" using "Capacities." But I don't see how labeling competencies as capacities accomplishes anything. The "capacities" you describe – relational, analytical, and communicative – appear to be labels for groupings of competencies. What you describe as "trainable traits" certainly applies to competencies. There is a trait component to every competency. On the skill – trait continuum, some competencies are more trait-oriented (e.g., patience, composure, compassion, etc.) and some are more skill-oriented (e.g., business acumen, functional/technical skills, etc.). All competencies can be learned (remember, that's part of the definition). I'm not sure how you define "Relational, Analytical, and Communicative," but I expect you'll need specific, more granular behaviors in each category to make them actionable and useful for development.

Let's not throw out competencies just because some people aren't using them effectively.

I don't think we need more words or classifications. We have plenty. Our field seems to lack savvy practitioners who understand both the value and limitations of competencies and are skilled in their application.