
Position Paper

Keeping a professional edge:
An uneasy discussion about
competency

by André John Haddad

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Why we need to revisit the competency concept.

As a management consultant for the last 10 years, I have been concerned for some time by what I see as the ineffectiveness of company development and training programs. Too often, top management relies on management change programs without any idea what the end result might be. My experience has shown me that such programs generally fail to generate conviction or engagement or, sadly, even enhance the competency of managers.

Too often, today's managers have not reinvented themselves: they still rely on what they learned in school 10, 20, or more years earlier – light years in terms of our fast-changing business environment.

We need to revisit the concept of competence, define a new model of competency for a manager. A few of the qualities of successful managers stand out:

1. They can see clearly. Masters at big-picture strategic planning, when negotiating agreements, they put great effort into trying to foresee emerging needs and technology years ahead. They take incredible risks but then back off seemingly incredible opportunities.
2. They know their strengths and use them wisely. Successful managers have always been known to surround themselves with the right people, not 'hangers-on' or 'yes men'.
3. They earn respect each day: They don't complain about how tough the job is. Successful managers can work with all kind of leaders – from egomaniacs to quiet solitary individuals. Successful managers tell them things they don't want to hear, starting with their views on what is not working and why.
4. They never bank on past successes to win tomorrow's battle. Successful managers find a way to reinvent themselves. They don't fall for fads and fashion; they identify what they need to change to do the job tomorrow.

This position paper is not about reinventing, although that's a logical next step; it's more about questioning the concept of competency as we understand it today, and asking how we prepare people to grow with the business and learn how to thrive, not simply survive, in the organizations of the 21st century.

Position Paper

Keeping a professional edge: An uneasy discussion about competency

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Introduction

Competency is generally understood as the application of knowledge and know-how to a particular field of endeavor. However, staying competent is another story altogether – it's not so much related to learning, as we traditionally understand it, as it is linked to change.

It's one thing to become an engineer, an investor or a surgeon; again, it's another story altogether to keep a professional edge 10, 15, 20 years down the road! In contrast, reputation, a byproduct of achieving competency, is likely to outlive it and so create an illusion of competency. As a result, having maintained a high level of proficiency and succeeding year after year in a tough-as-nails world, it takes courage to admit when we start to lose it. To admit to falling behind, while still enjoying a good reputation, is not easy.

Initially in our careers, becoming competent involved a formal journey of setting learning objectives, following curricula and passing exams. Once a certain level of competency has been achieved, we are given some kind of proof of that competency. Formal learning is then followed by a job with responsibilities and objectives to reach. This is when we get to practice what we have learned in school and when our career begins, along with the usual accompaniment of family, house, pets, etc. – what Zorba called “the whole catastrophe.”

Now, because research and discoveries keep humankind forever evolving and changing, we can appreciate that, while we are practicing our given profession, we are also starting to lag behind others who are still studying. They are in contact with new data, questioning old assumptions, developing new concepts, and inevitably making our data redundant and obsolete and potentially impacting our perceived competency.

In fact, three events are simultaneously in play when we talk about competency: (1) competency decay and erosion, (2) evolution and discovery, and (3) delusion or commitment.

Event 1: Competency decay and erosion

The knowledge on which we base our know-how and thus our right to declare our competency is dated. It decays by the hour; for some, by the minute. It's like a new Jaguar leaving the showroom. Once off the lot, you are driving a used car! It's still a Jag for a few more years, but it is now worth less, and its value will continue to shrink until it reaches zero. Some cars will, in time, regain their initial value and more, if they survive long enough to become “antique automobiles.”

Competency can also be understood as a living breathing creature. This creature ages more or less rapidly, distancing itself from current mainstream of knowledge as it inescapably advances through the years.

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If we apply the decay concept to 40-55-year-old managers, trained as engineers, investors, surgeons – or IT specialists – we can say that their value, as that of any product or service, is measurable, visible, finite and degradable. Competency decays and it can be assessed through its value to others. As we age in our professions, our value is shaped and changed.

Test it! Just listen to what your colleagues are saying every day and focus on those in the 40-55 age group. It's the same sound bits, heard over and over again, for some. You can predict their behavior! Others (few actually!) are resolutely grounded, they never relax and are always reinventing themselves!

When most of us try to keep up with new technologies, innovations or trends, we think in terms of seminars or conferences in hotels or fancy resorts or serving on committees.

Event 2: Evolution and discovery

There's a colossal amount of raw and sophisticated data that's being developed and communicated every minute. Few of us can or do keep up with new data and skills. Around the world, new information is being used to break through present-day limitations, to develop new concepts and create new skills. That newly developed know-how is eventually communicated outside traditional professional families through the Internet, intranet, universities, corporations and the media, fueling more creative developments, incredible innovations and completely new models of competency.

Event 3: Delusion or commitment

Delusion or commitment depend our ability to see clearly and to recognize the need to constantly learn. As discoveries and innovations inspire some to want to learn more, others will retreat, become defensive and simply not want to know.

It's about being lucid and rational, rather than emotional or indecisive, about where we stand. It's also about who we have become as managers and what may lie ahead. So we have to address at least two needs: the adaptive and the developmental need.

We adapt when a need requires us respond to changes that have affected the status quo. Whatever has occurred, it requires some kind of

quick response to the changed situation. For example, when kids lose interest in Sesame Street, Hannah Montana can take its place. It's about losing interest in one TV show and replacing it with another. We adapt!

We develop when a need requires a substantive change. Here there's a sense of urgency, either to reduce the negative effects or create choices. An unusual event usually triggers development rather than adaptation. For example, say you have produced your usual monthly analysis of operational failures. This time, for some unknown reason, people are angry at you. Although you're just doing your job as usual, something in your work environment has changed, new rules seem to have to come into play and you're no longer in control. It's no longer enough to bring the bad news to your colleagues; they now require you to propose solutions – and with realistic alternatives. This is an event that requires you to rethink your job, a situation that requires you to develop.

Ironically, we often don't even have to make mistakes or noticeably fail for others to question our abilities and competency. As we grow more comfortable with the way we do things, we believe we are in control. Basically, it's a failure on our part not to realize that things never stay the same and that gaps will appear sooner or later. Failing to recognize and commit to correcting competency gaps is a lethal combination that reduces lucidity and courage. Let's call it self-delusion.

Change and competency elements

How do we explain our firm belief that we are still competent after all these years of practicing our profession? Perhaps meaningful change only happens when a profound motivation, akin to life or death, self-preservation or destruction, is close at hand: Then and only then will a transformation take place. Ironically, these are the conditions required for growth – it's about having no options left or being very close to defeat – and knowing it!

We can say that life (personal and professional) is about going down a path to fragility. A few years ago, the so-called "Peter Principle" blissfully coincided with our final years on the job – or the planet! Unfortunately, the downward spiral of our decreasing value to others seems to be faster than before. For the sake of argument, let's assume that

most of us over 40 and still working with our original “diploma know-how” have arrived at that uncomfortable crossroads between the myth of eternal competency and the reassuring gimmick of keeping up via the latest seminar.

Yet we still work with the certainty that more of the same will do the job! And we quickly dismiss any wake-up call about our competency as frivolous and inconsequential.

Let’s note at this point that competence and its deterioration over time is totally unrelated to goodwill and integrity. Being a “good guy” doesn’t give us a free pass to competency!

The following elements come into play when we are talking about competency.

1. Identity

Some transformations needed to maintain competency may involve our identity, or who we think we are. Although we may be quite objective about our self-worth and competencies, nonetheless, we transform our skills into habits and customs and then a sense of control sets in. Through repetition and repeated success comes a sense of comfort, serenity, even pride. We begin to believe in our own inventions, they become a second skin and they help define who we are! We begin to believe that who we are comes down to what we do: “I’m an engineer,” “I’m a priest,” and “I’m a vice-president”. We achieve Maslow’s self-esteem level.

2. Staying put

In clear opposition to the theory of competency decay, a good argument can be made for the “don’t rock the boat” approach. Staying under the radar and getting promoted on the coattails of a boss for our steadfast support of whatever he says, are still worthwhile strategies with positive outcomes!

While “staying put” may not be an appealing strategy for any self-respecting leader, we must recognize its success rate and durability through the years. It works around the world, in all organizations, private or public. It thrives in democracies as well as in dictatorships. It’s been seen in hot and cold weather, in high-tech, low-tech and no-tech environments. It’s a universal approach to defensively protecting competency, yet

even this tactic needs its own skill set. Let’s call it survivalist.

The term “satisficing” can be useful in understanding the *Staying Put* position: Herbert Simon, winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize for economics, invented the word. It refers to behavior that aims at achieving a minimum level of success, but does not strive to attain the highest. Simon found “satisficing” particularly useful in describing a form of competency – the skill of surviving in an organization.

Let’s acknowledge that managers’ efforts to adjust to a changing world are desirable and necessary. However, organizational ecologists will argue that the very real changes called for today, the kind that alter identity, are initially too slow to be taken seriously and they do not seem to have any real impact on competency! Since environmental forces inside organizations tend to favor those with a high degree of structural inertia, staying put is a winning strategy, especially since organizational change increases rather than decreases the risk of professional failure!

3. Plodding on

With no easy alternatives available, managers usually plod on, making the best of what they know, doing more of the same old, same old they have developed over the years. But, when managers are faced with their own set of know-how changes to implement, they rely on transformation programs that generally fail to generate conviction, engagement or enhance competency in their employees. By and large, managers persist in using management change programs without really understanding what the end results will be!

Again this failure to maintain competency is largely due to archaic “diploma-type” beliefs, outdated knowledge, and the firm belief that more of what we know how to do will do!

4. Training for competency

After 25 years in the training business, trying out all kinds of methods, I no longer believe that company training programs are effective tools for maintaining competency. I used to believe that, through seminars and courses, managers and employees would be motivated to make the changes required, take on new challenges and, as

a result, improve their performance and enhance their competency. Unfortunately, I was wrong! Today, I believe it comes down to control rather than competency. The more we know about something, the more we feel in control of a limited range of knowledge, for a given period of time. It's rather like being a super-specialist.

5. Super specialization

Scientifically and historically, specialization has been a significant generator of personal advancement and productivity. The emergence of agricultural and industrial societies came about because of specialization. Now new generations of specialists are coming forward, making new global productivity breakthroughs.

For a few, specialization makes sense: they generate great inventions and master new and complex competencies. In the 20th and 21st centuries, specialization has and will characterize the elite of our societies.

However, regardless of the value of specialization for the advancement of the human race, individuals focused so intently in one area of expertise are confined to a smaller world, to fewer possibilities, and for a limited period of time. Think about the short careers of basketball players or astronauts or video-game designers. In the future, people who specialize early on in their careers may find themselves redundant in midlife. In this context, it makes sense to question professional viability over time. What about a test that assesses how many competent years we have left? Would it make sense to ask managers how they could prolong their usefulness and value to organizations?

Individual responsibility

Not unlike organizations that are accountable to shareholders and clients, individuals are also responsible for safeguarding their future by maintaining their value in the marketplace. How organizations adjust to inventions, discoveries, shifting markets and world events will, of course, impact that value; however, we as individuals are ultimately responsible for our own future.

For example:

1. Are we able and willing to occupy and maintain a cutting-edge position in our profession?

2. Can we transform ourselves fast enough to meet breathtaking client/employer expectations?
3. How do we do that?

To answer those questions, let's re-examine some of our basic beliefs about competency.

1. Few of us

Because few of us tend to think of our competency as decaying over time, it follows that few of us will take on the task of reinventing ourselves in the name of safeguarding and/or acquiring new competencies.

We believe in our competency; we believe we are getting better. We judge our worth in terms of our value to clients, to our boss, to our employees. We feel we have earned that worth and we can prove it! There's no hesitation on our part when confronted with problems we have encountered many times in the past. We comfort ourselves in the belief that we are still growing, intellectually and emotionally, that we are open-minded and fair.

2. Management expertise

We also feel strongly that we have learned a lot about managing people and about meeting client challenges. We like to believe that we have recruited the best people to deal with complex problems, client expectations and new technology. We have learned how to develop people, how to coach and mentor them, how to align their strengths; in other words, we have learned how to get the best out of people. As managers, we understand management in terms of people, time and money. We believe we are responsible to our shareholders, clients and employees for:

1. Managing talent.
2. Managing our clients' expectations and interests.
3. Making a profit.
4. Growing the business.
5. Adding value through innovation and creative business solutions.

But because we feel that we have made it, that we are still on top of our game, few of us feel the need to reinvent ourselves in mid-life. Why would we?

Conclusions

Our society has come to believe that a good manager can handle anyone, cope with any problem – and in just about any environment! A manager's number one priority has become the management of people.

Yet managing people is about learning and adapting to new realities and helping people achieve new levels of performance. That's our job as managers. We may have been whiz-kids earlier in our careers, but today our basic diploma skills are dated, if not obsolete. We need to be a reference for our employees, we need to know the 'technical stuff', we need to be able to answer their questions.

So, while most business principles that spawned successful careers remain valid, core premises about competency are now being challenged in the 21st century.

In the past, business cycles were simple to manage and clients were easily predicted and the

anchored competencies required were enough to carry us through our professional lives.

As we look to the future, perhaps the single most important insight of our careers will be our ability to recognize when we are falling behind. Our most significant act will be to safeguard our value to others.

This position paper is not about the actual process of *reinventing* ourselves, although that's a logical next step; it's more about questioning the concept of competency as we understand it today, and asking how we prepare people to grow with the business and learn how to thrive, not simply survive, in the organizations of the 21st century.

As a postscript, I have put together a few ideas about reinventing ourselves that I hope will stimulate thought and discussion.

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Postscript: Reinventing ourselves

By acquiring new capabilities through non-linear training, we can potentially be able to maintain competency and better address the challenges of the new business and social environments. We are in the midst of one of the most fundamental transformations in recent history and, as we assume more non-traditional responsibilities in the workplace, the competencies required far surpass those found in traditional career paths.

As organizations re-invent themselves, the possibilities for maintaining our competency probably lie in expanding our capabilities into different realms of study and endeavor. Operational capability in other domains has, for some, enabled them to respond to more complex and difficult challenges.

Imagine a business supported by people with multiple capabilities, or what I call pillars of strategic knowledge: they would broaden that company's scope, vision and problem-solving ability. Such multiple anchor points imply expanding our potential to understand and positively impact the business. Marketing would not only support operations (and vice versa), but also provide insight to R&D, to back office operations, etc. Multiple competencies would also enhance innovation and thus the growth and sustainability of the business.

Through multiple "understandings" of the world we live in and through the information readily available to us, new-generation employees are emerging. For example, interesting uses of competencies in different environments are former surgeons responsible for the marketing of pharmaceutical products, and ex-military officers leading aeronautic organizations.

So, why not let your Operations VP take a six-month training course on global demographics and politics? Or ask your CFO to study business ethics for a few semesters?