Oxford Policy Management

The following note was prepared to support the creation of a competency framework for health facility managers in an Indian state. It provides general guidance on the purpose and content of such frameworks, and a simplified methodology for their development. It also shows how competencies can be formulated to support desirable behaviours amongst staff, such as cooperation with other organizations.

The text is reproduced by kind permission of Oxford Policy Management, and has been amended to remove references to the specific programme for which it was originally developed.

Developing a competency framework

Introduction

The purpose of a competency framework is to define the knowledge, skills[1] and attitudes needed by individuals in an organisation, in different roles and at different levels, to perform their jobs effectively. Knowledge, skills and attitudes together determine behaviour, and competencies typically set out to define these by describing desirable behaviours, as these can be observed in the workplace.

Competencies can be used to support recruitment, performance management and training and development processes within the organisation. To be useful they must, however, fulfil some key conditions:

i. They must be realistic and meaningful to those whose work they apply to;
ii. As well as describing what happens at present, they should reflect a vision of the future and the behaviours the organisation wishes to encourage;
iii. They must be supported and owned by top management, and in particular those who are sponsoring and promoting change in the organisation;
iv. The completed competency framework should be presented in a way that is attractive, accessible to users and consistent with the language and style of the organisation.

It is also important to keep the number of competencies as small as possible and their descriptions as concise as possible. If the framework is too simple it will not capture all of the essential behaviours the organisation needs to recognise and promote, but it is very easy

[1] A skill is defined for these purposes as the ability to act with assurance that the action will achieve the desired results.

for the number of behaviours and the way they are described to expand until the framework becomes unrealistically elaborate and people ignore it.

Process

The process of gathering evidence to create a robust competency framework from scratch can be onerous and labour-intensive, as it is essential to begin by collecting evidence from the people who actually do the jobs concerned. Additional evidence may also be collected from their managers, and from stakeholders such as internal or external "customers" or users of the services they provide. While a comprehensive competency framework should eventually cover the entire organisation, it is likely to be most practicable to begin by focusing on one or two roles, and probably also (in a widespread organisation) by piloting the process in one or two limited geographical areas.

There are a number of quite sophisticated techniques for evidence-gathering in this field, such as repertory grid or critical incident interviewing. However, given the resources required to recruit or train specialist interviewers for this purpose, it may be prudent initially to adopt a simple methodology for eliciting practitioner views of the competencies needed to perform their role. This is particularly the case when a competency approach is being applied for the first time in a setting in which it is unfamiliar and untested. If it proves practical and effective as a means of developing workforce capacity, the results can if necessary be refined and validated using more elaborate techniques

The steps of a simpler and more easily deployed methodology are described below.

Step 1: Preparation

- Define the purposes for which the competency framework is being prepared, and decide on the **role** to be examined (for example, that of the District Hospital Manager).

- Confirm the **support** of senior management and other sponsors for the exercise.

- Determine **how many** job-holders at the chosen level will be interviewed, prepare an interview guide and work plan for the field work.

- Assemble and review relevant documentation such as job descriptions, terms of reference, strategic or business plans, operational manuals and codes of practice.

Step 2: Data collection

- Each interview will begin by asking the job-holder what the **purpose of the job** is, aiming to elicit 5 or 6 main tasks or activities, each described in a sentence beginning "To …". If a job description or terms of reference exist and some apparently significant tasks have not been named the interviewer should probe the reasons why and if appropriate add them to the list.

- For each of these tasks the interviewer should then seek to establish what **behaviours** an effective performer of the role should demonstrate. For example, if an identified task is “To supervise junior staff”, the appropriate question would be, “What does a good staff supervisor do; how do they behave?”. Answers should be in the form of a statement with an active verb, such as “Makes sure they complete their work accurately on time”, “Listens to their concerns”, “Provides them with the resources to do the job”. At least three relevant behaviours should be recorded for each task, but the process can be continued until the interviewee has nothing more of relevance to offer. These positive statements can be balanced by some examples of their opposites: “And how does a poor supervisor behave?” Recording these data on coloured cards or post-its will help the next stage (see Step 3 below).

- Similar interviews should be carried out with job-holders’ direct **line managers**, and if possible a sample of other stakeholders who are directly affected by the job-holder’s work – e.g. **service users or subordinates**. Care should be taken to ensure that interviewees are clear about which role is being discussed, and that the focus is on the qualities are needed to do that job well, not an appraisal of an individual job-holder (for subordinates this might be couched in terms of what they feel an ideal boss would be like). These interviews should take as their starting point the list of activities already established with the job-holder rather than seek to re-create this; not all of these activities may be within the direct knowledge of the interviewee, and if so the interview should focus only on those which are relevant.

- Interviews should also be held with senior managers, to establish in more general terms which aspects of the role under consideration they regard as most important and what behaviours and aspects of performance they expect of job-holders. These interviewees should not be expected to be familiar with the fine detail of the activities concerned, but should be able to articulate a **vision** of what they expect of these job-holders. These interviews, and to a lesser extent those with direct line managers, are important because they help to ensure that the emerging competencies express not just **what is** currently, but also **what is wanted**.

Step 3: Analysis and development

- Establish a consolidated **list of activities** actually performed by job-holders, and flag up for discussion with senior managers any significant mismatches between this and any formal job descriptions or terms of reference which exist for the role. Some activities which are formally prescribed but not currently performed may represent deficiencies which the organisation regards it of strategic importance, and for these competency statements may need to be developed without the benefit of direct input from job-holders. Other activities may be carried out which are not formally part of the role, and decisions will be needed as to whether these are to be discouraged (in which case related behaviour statements can be discarded) or added to the job description (in which case the data can be retained for inclusion the competency model). Note that the list of activities does not itself form part of the competency framework, but provides a check that behaviours related to all elements of the role have been included.

- **Review** the complete collection of statements of positive and negative behaviours, consolidate duplicates or near-duplicates, and discard outliers. Consider whether it is necessary to add any behaviours which have not been referred to by interviewees but are strongly indicated by documentary sources such as strategic plans. It will be helpful for this stage to have the behaviour statements on colour-coded cards or stickers, distinguishing between those which originated from job-holders, line managers, subordinates, service users and the consultant team carrying out the analysis.

- Consider which of the statements logically relate to each other or belong together, sort the statements them into three or four **clusters** and give each cluster a name. The categories represented by the clusters will vary from organisation to organisation depending on its context and the nature of its work, but the clusters for a typical public sector body might include:
    - Working with others
    - Leadership and accountability
    - Delivering results
    - Managing resources

These clusters should if possible be defined in ways which represent the expressed values and priorities of the organisation, as shown in documents such as strategic plans; giving them prominence in a competency framework is a very public statement that these are the values by which the organisation will assess its own conduct and performance, and is willing to be judged.

- Then further divide the statements in each cluster into subgroups of related behaviours; each subgroup represents an observable and demonstrable **competency**, and can be given an appropriate label which concisely describes the category of behaviour. For example:[2]

Cluster	Competencies
Working with others	Building and managing relationships
	Focusing on stakeholders and service users
	Communicating and influencing
Leadership and accountability	Strategic thinking
	Motivating and inspiring others
	Decision making
Delivering results	Planning and organising

[2] This table represents a fictional example for illustrative purposes only.

	Managing and improving performance
	Problem solving
Managing resources	Delivering value for money
	Using resources responsibly
	Valuing and supporting staff

Some of these competencies will relate to **task-**related knowledge or skills, such as understanding of accounting regulations and procedures or analysis and problem-solving, and others to **people-**related skills or attitudes, such as working collaboratively or inspiring and motivating others. It is good practice to check whether your emerging set of competencies has a good balance between task and people competencies, and if not what that tells you about the organisation: is there an imbalance in priorities which needs to be rectified?

- Refer back to the underlying behaviour statements to develop simple and concise **behavioural indicators** that describe the kinds of behaviour which will demonstrate the competency concerned. These will not be a comprehensive checklist but taken together will clearly show what is expected of people. Try to develop between four and six positive indicators that describe desired effective behaviours, and one or two that characterise ineffective behaviours. They should be expressed using active, present-tense verbs to describe what a person actually does. For example:

Competency	Indicators
Planning and organising	✔ Prioritises work in line with key team or project deliverables
	✔ Makes contingency plans to account for changing work priorities, deadlines and milestones
	✔ Identifies and consults with sponsors or stakeholders in planning work
	✔ Pays close attention to detail, ensuring team's work is delivered to a high standard
	✔ Negotiates realistic timescales for work delivery, ensuring team deliverables can be met
	Initiates work activity without ensuring that relevant consultation and sponsorship are in place
	Maintains original timescales despite changing circumstances; misses deadlines due to inflexibility

- Decide how the resulting framework should be **presented**, in a form that is memorable, easily understood by people who have to use, and clearly show the interrelationship between its component parts. Depending on the context, this might be in a simple tabular format, or in some other form. Quite frequently competency models show clusters, competencies and indicators as segments of concentric circles; any number of other formats are possible.

Step 4: Test the model

- Having established a working version of the framework, **test and validate** it thoroughly before implementation. This should involve:
  - discussions with senior managers and other sponsors of the initiative to ensure that the values and priorities expressed by or implicit in the model reflect those of the organisation, or a desired direction of change;
  - testing both the competencies defined by the model and the way they are expressed with a sample of job-holders and other stakeholders. This can be done through further interviews, workshops or even questionnaires. The key questions to ask about each are:
    - is this behaviour demonstrated by people who perform the work most effectively?
    - is this behaviour relevant and necessary for effective performance in the job?
- **Refine** and finalise the framework as necessary, as regards the inclusion or modification of each defined competency, the language it is expressed in, and the visual representation of the model.
- As part of a **final review**, consider whether the completed framework reflects an appropriate balance between:
  - competencies focussed on knowledge, skills and attitudes;
  - -task-oriented and people oriented competencies;
  - competencies derived from information provided by job-holders and those prompted by senior management or strategic documentation.

On the last point, the balance will depend largely on the purpose for which the framework has been commissioned. If there is an existing capable and effective workforce and the need is to document their working practices, for example to support recruitment and performance management, or to refresh an existing set of competencies and bring them into line with current practice, then the emphasis will be on job-holders' evidence. The less the case – for example in circumstances of very weak current capacity, or where there is a need to catalyse major organisational change or to create new roles – the more important it will be to include competencies required by the organisation, even if these are not recognised or are resisted by the present workforce.

Step 5: Implement and review

- How the completed model is rolled out across the organisation will depend on the **purpose** for which it was created. Competency frameworks can be developed as a basis for performance management, to guide learning and development and capacity building programmes, to assist recruitment and selection, to support organisational change by providing a clear statement of espoused values for staff and public, or any combination of these purposes.

- However, whatever the purpose it was intended to serve, it is advisable to build in a plan for review of the effectiveness and utility of the framework at a specified time when it is launched. It will be important to know whether the model needs refinement or adjustment before it loses credibility with staff and falls into disuse.

Expanding the framework

If the model proves useful it is likely to be appropriate to expand it to cover more or all roles in the organisation. It is often the intention of management to create a comprehensive framework applicable to all staff, and explicitly linked to the aims and values expressed in strategic plans or other high-level documents. The process for doing so will mirror the steps described above, especially regarding the need to collect information about each role covered; care will be needed to guard against the assumption that behaviours applicable to one role are necessarily relevant to another.

Expansion can be seen as taking place both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, the framework will probably need to accommodate a number of different roles at the same organisational level, but with different areas of technical expertise. It is likely that a some or many core competencies (especially in people-related competency areas such as leadership, or functional skills such as problem solving or strategic thinking) will be common to all staff or all staff at a given level, while other task-related competencies will be linked to the expert requirements of a role (such as knowledge or skills in a clinical field, or in a management specialism such as accountancy). The framework will have to be constructed in such a way as to recognise common competencies while giving due weight to more specialised role requirements.

Vertically, an expanded framework will also have to apply to staff at different levels in the organisation. The usual solution is to show how competencies are exercised in different ways at different levels, with different sets of descriptive indicators devised to show the increasingly onerous expectations of more senior levels. For example, a particular competency might typically be shown as applying to each of four levels in an organisation – front-line workers, first-line managers or supervisors, middle managers and senior executives – with a different set of indicators for each competency level. It is generally understood that these are cumulative, with an effective manager at level 3 also displaying the behaviours specified for levels 1 and 2. Careful analysis and calibration is required to ensure that the different behavioural characteristics described correlate closely with the actual demands of the role at each level, and adjustment over time is likely to be necessary.

Sources of information

The competency framework will be designed for a specific group of staff (e.g. district health managers and administrative staff) and will be informed by evidence from various sources. These will include:

1. **Job descriptions or terms of reference** for the staff roles concerned. However, in many cases these will not be available, or will exist only in a standardised form (for example national guidelines) the relevance of which to the roles actually being performed in the locations concerned will need to be carefully tested.
2. **Any legislative or regulatory documents** which allocate specific duties or responsibilities to particular groups of staff or prescribe the qualifications, skills or experience required for a role.
3. Findings from any **previous evaluations, capacity assessments or programme planning** documents which might describe the roles and responsibilities of the staff concerned.
4. Findings from the **data collection and validation field work** described above.