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Employee Competency Checklist

January 29, 2010

Employee Core Competencies – A Proven Tool for an Organization’s Success

“Hi, you got a minute?” It’s your fourth interruption this morning. It’s Sally, the Operations Manager. You know when she says, “Do you have a minute?” it usually means, “Do you have a half hour?” She comes in and sits down in your guest chair and you figure that you can spare a half hour before your next meeting. You’ve been the HR manager for your company now for five years so you can tell that Sally really needs to talk to you and it’s about one of her employees. You can probably guess which one, but you let her tell you.

“It’s about Joe. He’s been acting up again. He’s a great worker! His productivity numbers this past month are the best in the group. But, he’s been saying negative things about the new process. Every time we introduce something new or change the process, he gets really upset and starts complaining to everybody around him and says things like, ‘Management doesn’t know what they are doing!’” You know Joe. He has been with the company for three years. You remember hiring him to fill a critical role. You remember how hard it was for you to fill the position. You remember how excited you were when you found his resume in the stack and how relieved you were when Sally wanted to hire him after the interviews and the references were good.

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Now three years later, Sally is describing yet another situation where Joe is saying things that upset the people around him and being resistant to something new that has been introduced. Sally is describing the events to you. She keeps going back to her point, “But he’s a really good performer!” “What rating did you give him on his last review?” you ask, already knowing the answer. “I gave him an ‘Outstanding’ because his production numbers were so good.” You make a note. You know that is going to be a problem for you and Sally in how you address the issue with Joe.

As an HR professional for over 25 years, I have seen this scenario played out countless times, as I am sure you have too. In our moments of frustration, we might think, “How can a manager call an employee a good performer when they exhibit such poor behavior?” More specifically, the question should be what do you do when you have an employee who works hard, stays relatively productive, but then exhibits certain behaviors that can be considered disruptive, but at the same time, difficult to define? Asked another way, how can we, as HR professionals, do a better job of helping employees understand that their behaviors are part of their performance? It’s not just about their productivity.

Employee Core Competencies as an HR Tool

Enters the competency-based assessment. It’s not a new innovation or trend – but that is a good thing. Employee competency assessments have been around long enough to have withstood the test of time and have proven to be a very useful tool for the HR professional’s toolbox. Employee competencies are a list of skills and behaviors that are specific and well defined and are used to lay out an organization’s performance expectations for a job or the organization’s culture as a whole. There are many resources out there for the HR professional to help them develop and customize a list of competencies their organization can call their own.

Employee competencies can be used in a variety of ways. They can be integrated into performance appraisals, hiring practices, succession planning, as well as on-boarding orientations and other forms of employee communication. Competencies are a way to address both the technical skills of a job and the more difficult-to-define behavioral expectations of a job – sometimes referred to as the “soft skills.” But, there is nothing soft about these skills and a well-defined set of competencies can help an organization better evaluate and measure employee performance.

Competency Skill Checklist

The actual number of competencies an organization may choose to use varies widely from one organization to the next, but a good rule is between 10 and 20. Some examples of competencies organizations might use would be:

1. Business acumen
2. Emotional stability
3. Interaction with others
4. Problem solving
5. Use of software tools
6. Work ethic

Notice that they are a combination of both skills such as “Business Acumen” and “Use of Software Tools” and behaviors such as “Emotional Stability” and “Work Ethic.” How the employee competency is defined should be determined by how each organization chooses to define it to fit their current work culture or the way they want it to be.

Competency Based Assessments Provide Clarity

Let’s look at how employee competencies can provide value to an organization by providing better definition to important HR practices. We can use our example of Sally the Operations Manager and her employee Joe. Let’s say their organization is going to be experiencing a lot of growth and expansion over the next couple of years. A good competency to develop

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would be one that defines how they want their employees to handle the growth and expansion. They're going to want their employees to be adaptable and flexible to the growth and maintain a willingness to accept the inevitable changes that are coming. So they might create a competency called "Adaptability" and define it accordingly:

Adaptability – the ability to remain flexible during periods of change. Thriving in a fast-paced work environment. Remaining enthusiastic and keeping a positive attitude during change initiatives.

Now that they have their competency defined, they can apply it to several different aspects of their work environment and processes. They can incorporate their competencies into their performance appraisal process. Using the example of "Adaptability," their performance appraisal might contain criteria such as:

Adaptability	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
• Embraces change.				
• Remains enthusiastic when faced with challenge.				
• Keeps a positive attitude during the introduction of new process.				

In our earlier example of Sally the Operations Manager and her challenges with Joe, we can see that a performance appraisal with defined competencies will help Sally not only evaluate Joe against the defined competency, but help her communicate to Joe what he is or isn't doing. Sally can say, "Joe, you are a hard worker and your productivity numbers are solid, but as I stated in your performance appraisal, an important aspect of being a good performer is handling change positively and being supportive with your words and actions. In addition to your productivity, I need you to be adaptable to the changes we are making. That is just as much a part of your performance as your productivity."

With the employee competency of "Adaptability" well-defined, Sally is better equipped to evaluate Joe's overall performance in a way that is aligned with the overall company's expectations of what they expect from their employees. With the competency incorporated into the performance appraisal process, Sally can better understand that an employee can only be a good performer if they meet all of the criteria that define it including "Adaptability."

Employee Competencies Help with Hiring

Another way in which competencies can be used is in the hiring process. Having well defined employee competencies can be used to help develop interview questions that help determine if job candidates are a good fit for the job and the organization. Using our example of "Adaptability," Sally can ask job candidates a question such as, "Describe a situation where changes were made that you did not necessarily agree with and how you handled the changes?" This will help her determine if the job candidates she is interviewing are a good fit for their fast-paced work environment and screen out candidates who answer the question in a way that shows that they don't like change.

Competencies can be also be used in employee communications. The organization's competency list for a specific job can be handed out during on-boarding orientations so that new employees know what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated. Competencies can also be a topic of discussion at all employee meetings or employee newsletters providing important and ongoing touch points with the employees so that they keep a high level of awareness of the employee core competencies and their expectations to align with them.

In my practice as a consultant, I have found the use of employee competencies to be a valuable tool to help organizations make sure there is alignment between their stated corporate goals and their expectations of how employees make it possible to achieve them. When competency -based assessments are used, there is better alignment between managers and the expectations they have of their employees. But there is also better alignment cross-organizationally and that is always the recipe for an organization's success. Organizations that use well-defined competencies effectively give their employees a better platform to not only succeed, but excel as performers and as satisfied employees.

Regards,
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