

Managing Personal Competencies

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Introduction

Module 1 Introduction to Personal Competencies

Introduction to Personal Competencies

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Learning Objectives

After completing this module you should be able to:

- understand what is meant by management competencies;
- describe how the concept of competency developed in management thought;
- recognise the differences between work-based and person-based competency statements;
- understand the concept of a hierarchy of managerial competencies;
- appreciate the idea of meta-competency;
- understand the EBS definition of personal managerial competency;
- understand the learning process model for competencies development that is employed in the course.

1.1 Introduction: Aim of the Course

The primary aim of the course *Managing Personal Competencies* is to ensure that the student acquires (i) a range of underlying generic competencies relating to personal effectiveness and managing people (termed here 'meta-competencies') and (ii) a set of specific competencies relating to the key HR functions of acquiring, maintaining and developing staff.

Specifically, the generic competencies regarding personal effectiveness and managing people are the following.

Generic (meta-) competencies:

- self-awareness and reflection
- self-management
- communication competencies
- leadership and influencing
- managing the performance of others

The specific competencies regarding HR functions are as follows.

Competencies for people management:

- change management competencies
- teamworking competencies

Competencies relating to acquiring staff:

- employee-resourcing competencies (comprising human resource planning, recruitment and selection, and induction)

Competencies relating to maintaining and developing staff:

- learning and development competencies
- employee relations competencies (comprising competencies for negotiation, bargaining, discipline, grievance and dispute resolution)

1.2 The Need for Competencies: A Case Study. Acme Electronics

Acme Electronics plc was founded in 1924 by Bill Hoyle, a pioneering electrical and electronic engineer, and in the second half of the 20th century was something of an icon of British high technology. For the period since the end of the Second World War to the end of the Cold War (1945 to 1989) the company had been highly dependent on UK government defence contracts. Until the mid-1980s these large defence projects were carried out on a 'cost-plus' basis, where the firm charged the UK Ministry of Defence the total cost of the project and then added an acceptable profit margin. This allowed the firm to pursue engineering excellence to produce the best possible defence products. One of its major achievements was the development of world-beating sea radar for UK fighter aircraft such as the Sea Harrier Jump Jet, which the US Navy declared to be 'twenty years ahead of any thing we have'. Much of the firm's work in that period remains classified, for security reasons. The firm had a reputation for attracting and retaining some of the very best engineering and science graduates in the UK, who were attracted by the technical challenges of its defence work.

The large government contracts and the 'cost-plus' basis of contracting insulated the firm from the commercial realities of a competitive global market, and the firm's reputation for management never quite equalled that for its technology. In the mid-1980s the UK government, keen to inject more efficiency into the defence industry, stopped the practice of 'cost-plus' contracting, and the market for defence contracts became much more competitive. Acme found it difficult to compete. Its technological competencies were as impressive as ever, but increasingly it seemed to observers that the firm was lacking managerial and strategic skills. This impression was confirmed when an American partner who had been brought into sharpen up Acme's business skills was found to have embezzled over \$100 million from the company. The partner went to jail, and the firm went into bankruptcy.

It was bought by the Universal Electric Company (UEC), the biggest UK engineering conglomerate, which already had a considerable presence in the defence industry. UEC had been created and was still managed by the formidable Lord Portis, who practised a particularly stringent type of financial control that included, amongst other practices, his telephoning every divisional managing director every month and asking for personal explanations for all discrepancies between performance and budget. Personal accountability at all levels is the keynote of the UEC managerial culture.

Acme has been rationalised by its new owners (or 'ruthlessly asset-stripped', according to some company insiders), but UEC values its core competencies which have been retained in a new division called Acme Defence Solutions (ADS). After a full review of ADS's physical and human resources, UEC has concluded that its new acquisition contains significant managerial potential in its engineering project managers that could benefit UEC as a whole.

Six months after the takeover, Bill Smith, a project engineer who worked for over 10 years for Acme before it was acquired by UEC, was not a happy man. He has just had his first performance appraisal from his boss Gerry White, who came over from UEC to head Bill's department.

Bill had soon found that Gerry's way of working was very different from the old Acme way. Gerry's view was 'If you are project head then we will give you all the resources you need – and then keep out of your way and give you room to use your expertise and talent.' Bill liked the freedom this gave, but he found he was expected to deal with a lot of managerial tasks and 'people problems' that he had never had to bother with before. For instance, he personally had to interview and select the team members for the project. In Acme he would work out what skills were needed to get the job done and request that the various departments send people with these skills to the project for the duration. In effect the departments did the personnel selection and sent him the experts he needed. Now he had to 'compete' with all the other project managers for what seemed to be increasingly scarce talent.

Bill realised that everyone was under pressure after the takeover, but many of his team members seemed much less cooperative than they used to be. Bill, who is a highly qualified and experienced electronic engineer, was used to applying his knowledge and skills to problems, getting the answers, and then telling people

what to do to put the solutions into practice. Now his team often questioned his instructions and suggested alternatives. Bill wasn't against that, but he found it difficult to deal with such questions and discussions face to face when he wasn't prepared. He once asked his team to put all questions or suggestions to him by email so that he could think about the issues and have time to respond. He was rather surprised that the questioning just dried up. However, he was aware that the team was not happy with that, so he scrapped the suggestion about emailing him and reluctantly went back to taking face-to-face questions. The team still seemed rather inhibited, however, and Bill realised that he hadn't handled that well, but was a loss as to what he might have done.

Bill had another serious 'people problem' with one of his team, Jack Brown. Jack had also been with Acme for a number of years before the takeover, and had reached the position of senior engineer. Bill knew and respected Jack's ability as an engineer, but for some reason Jack didn't like working in Bill's team, and Bill thought he performed very poorly almost from the start. Bill spoke to him a couple of times about his motivation, which Jack seemed to resent. These 'pep talks' had no effect, so Bill went to Jack's department head and asked him to replace Jack on the project with another engineer. This had been common practice in Acme when a team member underperformed, so Bill was surprised to be told that Jack would be staying on the project and that it was his (Bill's) responsibility to manage Jack's performance. Jack learnt that Bill had tried to have him removed from the project, and now the two were barely on speaking terms. Again, Bill was aware that he had not handled the situation with Jack well, but couldn't think what else he could or should have done. He thought UEC had put him in an impossible position as project team leader, and he was beginning to resent this.

1.2.1 The Performance Appraisal

Gerry began the interview by asking Bill to recap progress over the past four months since the new project began, Bill's first since the takeover.

Bill said that he thought that technically the project was going very well, and solutions had been found to a number of very difficult engineering problems. However, he admitted that his team was being very slow to put these solutions into practice, and the project was starting to run significantly behind schedule. Bill thought that UEC put far more effort into chasing artificial time targets than Acme ever had.

Gerry then asked how the team had 'settled in'. Bill admitted there had been problems, and told Gerry honestly about the difficulty he had in dealing with team members' questions and in motivating Jack.

Bill said, 'I never had to deal with people issues at Acme. We worked in a matrix structure, like we do now, with departments of technical specialists who were seconded to projects under people like me. Projects typically lasted for years. If someone didn't match up or fit in I just got a replacement the next day. The performance on the project was everything and my job was to make the project succeed physically – get the radar or the rocket guidance systems or whatever to

work. Technological excellence was our only requirement. As long as we produced the goods we got whatever resources and people we said we wanted. I've shown over the years that I can run state-of-the-art engineering projects if people just do what I tell them. I've never had to do this human resource stuff before. I don't know how, and I'm no good at it. I am an engineering project manager.'

Activity 1

Think about Bill's situation and the consequences for himself, his team and UEC. What can be done?

1.3 Definitions of Skills and Competencies

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'skill' as 'the ability to do something well; expertise or dexterity', deriving from the Old English *scele* meaning 'knowledge' and the Old Norse *skil*, for 'discernment' or 'knowledge'. The same source defines 'competency' as 'the quality or extent of being competent', which in turn is described as 'having the necessary ability or knowledge to do something successfully', from the Latin *competere* in the sense of 'being fit and proper'. It is interesting that there is the root meaning of 'knowledge' for both terms.

Although previous usage of the term 'skill' in management literature often covered what we would now define as 'competence', the latter term is often favoured now. Statements of competence tend to be both fuller in detail and broader in scope than most descriptions of skills, and therefore give more precise meaning. They are also usually more explicitly focused on the achievement of acceptable performance in the job, rather than on mere possession of the capability to perform properly. So, for example, while a *skilled* bricklayer will possess the knowledge and ability required to do his or her job properly, in any particular case he or she may not actually work well, for whatever reason, but a *competent* bricklayer not only has the knowledge and ability needed, but in fact performs proficiently. This use of the terms 'skill' and 'competency' may seem to be the converse of normal usage: 'skilled' normally suggests a high level of capability whereas 'competent' can imply 'mere competence', that is, the ability to achieve a minimum acceptable standard; but it reflects the managerial imperative for people actually to achieve effective performance and not just to possess the capability to do so.

The Canon Working Party Report into management education training and development in the UK (1994) gave a general description of the notion of management competency in the following way.

'The term competency is taken to mean the ability to perform effectively functions associated with management in a work-related situation.'

1.3.1 Specific Definitions of Competencies in the Management Literature

The term 'competency' first came to widespread managerial attention in the USA following the work of Richard Boyatzis' study *The Competent Manager* (1982), which

followed earlier work by Klemp (1980). Mangham and Silver (1986), explicitly citing Boyatzis, introduced the term to the UK debate on management development, reporting that many UK organisations and managers at that time lacked even the vocabulary to describe or define properly what they meant by 'competent managerial performance'. At around the same time vocational education in the UK was undergoing a revolution in which traditional examinations and tests of work skills were transformed into 'competence-based' awards. This brings us immediately to a key point in our definitions of competence.

Boyatzis described competency as the 'capacity that exists in a person that leads to behaviour that meets the job demands within the parameters of the organisation environment and that in turn brings results'. The UK Training Agency defined competence as 'actions, behaviour or outcome that the person should be able to demonstrate'. These subtly different definitions actually show that there are two distinct models of competence. The first, following Boyatzis' definition, is what can be termed an 'input model'. That is, it is mainly concerned with defining and describing what a competent person brings to the task or job, for example knowledge or skill, such as the ability to read a balance sheet, or some other attribute such as a personality or character trait, like empathy or hardiness, and so forth. This model is sometimes referred to as 'person related'. The second, exemplified by the UK Training Agency definition, is an 'output model' and is predominantly concerned with actual performance, for example undertaking the task of totting up a balance sheet correctly, thus demonstrating that the task can be competently done. This is also described as a 'work-related' model.

In practice the distinction is not always clear-cut, and descriptions of output-based competencies may include, for example, some specified knowledge requirements in addition to the observable behaviours that lead to effective demonstration of the stated tasks.

1.3.2 Competency-Related Human Resource Management

Armstrong (2001) defined 'competency-related human resource management' as being 'about using the concept of competency and the results of competency analysis to inform and improve the processes of recruitment and selection, employee development and employee reward' (p. 299). As he noted, the language of competency has dominated much of HR thinking and practice in recent years, largely because it is essentially about individual performance and consequently organisational effectiveness.

Although there is often confusion between individual and organisational competencies these are linked, and another reason for the interest in individual competencies is undoubtedly the importance attached to organisational 'core competencies' (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Given that these are usually dependent on the organisation attracting, retaining and motivating key personnel, the HR profession can perhaps be forgiven for jumping on this particular bandwagon.

1.3.3 Competency Frameworks

A 'competency framework' is essentially a structured collection of competencies used by an organisation to frame and underpin managerial activities, or, in the case of a professional body, to show the requirements for its qualified practitioners. The use of competency frameworks has become an increasingly accepted part of modern HR practice. Rankin (2004) reported that 76% of responding UK companies when surveyed used competency frameworks or were about to introduce them. The use of competency frameworks has also extended to senior levels of the organisation (top and middle management) in addition to clerical and administrative and non-office roles.

It has been found empirically that employers' competency frameworks typically contain between 10 and 20 basic competencies, which relate to a spectrum of roles across the organisation (IDS, 2001). In addition, some organisations have developed role-specific or technical competencies to address the problem of the basic competencies being inadequate for particular roles or jobs. More recently some organisations have established organisational-cultural competencies that seek to reflect the ethos of the company itself, and these are concerned with ensuring that employees work in a way that is consistent with company culture.

Competency frameworks are now widely used to help select, appraise, train and develop staff (CIPD, 2005). For example, in the recruitment process, competencies can contribute to the content of job or role profiles, any written or practical tests, and the job interview itself. Banks of potential interview questions can be developed that are directly linked to a role's competencies. Competencies, together with personal objectives or targets, can form the basis of the appraisal systems used by organisations. In this way, employers can measure how staff carry out their work through assessing their performance against personal objectives and the role's required competencies.

1.3.4 Definition of Personal Managerial Competencies

Bearing in mind the description of managerial competency given by the Canon Working Party cited above, for the purposes of the present course we define 'personal managerial competencies' as:

The competencies that must be mastered by the individual manager rather than being shared within a group or team.

They include both purely self-related competencies, such as time management, and competences that deal with working with and managing other people, such as team-building. They do not include those competencies that are shared amongst managers and other staff, which constitute 'organisational competencies' or 'core competencies' in the sense used by Hamel and Prahalad (1994). Unlike 'core competencies' these personal competencies are very largely independent of the organisation or professional grouping to which the manager belongs: all effective managers should possess them.

1.4 A Hierarchy of Management Competencies

There is a logical hierarchy of competencies, in that complex management tasks such as negotiating, or managing large projects or planning strategy, require the application of a combination of less complex competencies. Underlying all management activities there is a small set of what we term here ‘meta-competencies’, which we identify in this course as self-awareness and reflection, self-management, communication, leadership and influencing, and managing the performance of others (see Table 1.1). There are also competencies, which we term ‘intermediate competencies’, that lie between the meta-competencies and the competencies exercised in complex management tasks, and these include, for example, managing teams, and managing unit or department budgets. We can loosely define ‘intermediate’ competencies as relating to managerial activities at the level of the team or immediate work unit, and ‘complex’ competencies as relating to activities with strategic implications for the whole organisation or strategic business unit.

We should note, however, that the meta-competencies in themselves are not necessarily simpler in terms of content or ease of application than ‘complex’ or intermediate ones. For example, we suggest that leadership, one of the most difficult and important management activities, is actually a meta-competency. Leadership is not simpler than, for example, managing a budget or managing a large project or handling collective bargaining.

Table 1.1 lists the meta-competencies.

Table 1.1 The meta-competencies

Meta-competencies	Main components
Self awareness and reflection	• Emotional intelligence • Learning styles • Reflection
Self management	• Setting your own goals • Time management
Communication competencies	• Interpersonal communication • Non verbal communication • Writing • Making oral presentations
Leadership and influencing	• Actioning • Managing work • Motivating • Managing performance • Supporting
Managing the performance of others	• Planning performance • Supporting performance • Assessing performance

The concept of a hierarchy implies that relevant competencies at a ‘lower’ level in the hierarchy should be acquired before ‘higher’ ones can be mastered. So, for instance, it might be possible for managers to learn something about how to negotiate with trade unions or to manage large projects without having mastered leadership competencies, but not only would they certainly be less effective all-round managers without leadership competencies, they would also be much less

successful at these particular management tasks. A hierarchy of intermediate and complex managerial competencies is shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Hierarchy of some managerial competencies

Meta-competencies	Intermediate management competencies (examples)	Complex management competencies (examples)
Self awareness and reflection	Team building Team leading/motivating	Collective bargaining
Self management	Managing unit/department budgets	Negotiating
Communication competencies	Managing unit/department projects	Dispute resolution
Leadership and influencing	Handling local discipline issues	Managing large-scale projects Planning and implementing strategy
Managing the performance of others	Handling (local) grievances Recruitment and selection Coaching Mentoring Training	Management development

The entries under the headings of 'intermediate' and 'complex' management competencies are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Not all of these intermediate and complex management competencies are covered in this course, although the set of HR competencies that we deal with contains competencies at both these levels, as indicated in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Examples of HR competencies at intermediate and complex levels

HR competencies	Level of competency	
	Intermediate	Complex
Change management		
Teamworking	Team formation	
Employee resourcing	Recruitment and selection	HR planning
Learning and development	Individual learning	Management development
Employee relations	Individual grievance and discipline	Collective bargaining

1.5 Reflection and Competencies

The conventional view of professional practice held that professionals operate by applying formally learnt specialist or technical knowledge. This was challenged by influential work by Schön (1983, 1987). He argued that this was not actually the way that professionals usually solved problems. Rather, they used a form of tacit knowledge linked to specific activities that he termed 'knowledge in action'. They also developed what he called 'repertoires' of solutions, and learnt how to reinterpret difficult problems so that they were more easily solved by the use of these repertoires. Schön argued that for initial development, for day-to-day

practice and for continuous improvement, 'reflection' was the crucial competence. He distinguished between two types of reflection: 'reflection in action', which took place during the event; and 'reflection about action', which took place after the activity. Schön's work has been highly influential, and has led directly to the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' or 'reflective professional', which has become central to the continuing development programmes of many professional bodies, including management ones (the CIPD, for example). The EBS model of personal competencies fully incorporates the idea of the reflective manager.

1.6 Organising the Learning Process for Competency Development

Whetton and Cameron (1994) developed an approach to teaching management skills based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Davis and Luthans, 1980) that combined conceptual knowledge with opportunities to practise and apply behaviour. Their original learning model consisted of four steps:

1. the presentation of behavioural principles or action guidelines, generally using traditional instruction methods;
2. demonstration of the principles by means of cases, films, scripts or incidents;
3. opportunities to practise the principles through role plays or exercises;
4. feedback on performance from peers, instructors or experts.

The authors later added a fifth, pre-assessment stage to the model, since they found from experience that in order to benefit from the model individuals must be aware of their current levels of proficiency in a specific competency, and be motivated to improve on that level. The resulting five-stage learning model was adopted by Quinn *et al.* (2003) in their text *Becoming a Master Manager: A Competency Framework*, and termed by these authors the 'ALAPA' model from the acronym for the five stages: assessment, learning, analysis, practice and application. These authors have continued to employ this model (e.g. Whetton and Cameron, 2005).

The framework for teaching management skills devised by Fandt (1994), which in many respects independently echoes the Cameron and Whetton learning architecture, was also influential in our approach in the present text.

The EBS MBA elective courses on Negotiation and on Influence, authored by Professor Gavin Kennedy, demonstrate that managerial competencies can be taught successfully by the EBS approach to distance learning.

We have built on the work of the authors noted above in operationalising skills teaching for distance learning, and have added a significant development by incorporating a final reflective stage to encourage and enable future self-development in the competency concerned. This represents a crucial development of the learning model that is not present in either the Cameron and Whetton or the Fandt models. The learning process exhibited in this course follows a five-stage model, as shown in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4 The learning process for managing personal competencies

Learning stage	Means of achieving learning
1. Assessment of existing competence level	Via self-assessment test
2. Understanding the competency	Via study of the theory underlying the competency
3. Applying the competency	By analysing case studies and illustrations
4. Feedback on performance	By comparing performance with the supplied answer guidance
5. Reflection and further development	Keeping a diary/log

1.7 The Relationship between the Meta-Competencies and the HR Competencies Covered in this Course

Table 1.5 shows how the meta-competencies that we have identified relate to the HR competencies that are covered in the course. We can see that self-awareness and reflection, self-management and communication are concerned with all of the HR competencies. In fact we can say that these particular meta-competencies are vital in the effective application of virtually all managerial activities, not just those concerned with human resources.

Table 1.5 Relationship between the meta-competencies and the HR competencies, as covered in the course

	People management competencies		Competencies for acquiring staff	Competencies for maintaining and developing staff	
	<i>Complex</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>Complex</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>Complex</i>
Meta-competencies	Change management	Teamworking	Employee resourcing	Learning and development	Employee relations
Self-awareness and reflection	X	X	X	X	X
Self-management	X	X	X	X	X
Communication competencies	X	X	X	X	X
Leadership and influencing	X	X		X	X
Managing the performance of others	X	X			

1.8 The Acme Case Study Revisited: Developing Engineers into General Managers

Once they recognised the problem of the deficiencies in the competencies among the former Acme project engineers, UEC management addressed it by setting up a management development programme for those concerned. First the Human Resources Department drew up a competency framework that the company required of their general managers. Profiles of individual project managers were then mapped onto this to identify where there were gaps.

Activity 2

As an exercise, using the information in Table 1.2 and Table 1.3, identify which competencies Bill needs to acquire.

1.8.1 What the Company Did

A group of 20 project managers was selected as a pilot. A tripartite agreement between the company (represented by UEC's training director), a local university business school and an FE college was established.

Each of the 20 managers in the pilot group was assisted in drawing up a personal portfolio of his or her managerial skills and experience. Gaps in development were filled by a mixture of planned experience in the company, taught theoretical courses at the business school, and skills workshops provided by the FE college. For example, most of the managers had no direct experience in recruitment and selection of staff, so these managers were invited to sit in on relevant MBA classes in HRM at the business school as non-examinable participants; the FE college put on a weekend in interviewing skills; and the company arranged for the managers to participate in selection interviews across the company. The project managers' progress in developing their competency profiles was factored into their performance management reviews and appraisals.

Summary Points

1. The main objective of the course *Managing Personal Competencies* is to ensure that the student acquires both a range of underlying generic competencies relating to personal effectiveness and managing people ('meta-competencies') and a set of specific competencies relating to the key HR functions of acquiring, maintaining and developing staff.
2. The generic (meta-) competencies comprise: self-awareness and reflection; self-management; communication; leadership and influencing; and managing the performance of others.

The specific competencies regarding HR functions are:

- i. Competencies for people management: change management competencies; and teamworking competencies
 - ii. Competencies relating to acquiring staff: employee resourcing competencies (comprising human resource planning, recruitment and selection, and induction)
 - iii. Competencies relating to maintaining and developing staff: learning and development competencies; employee relations competencies (comprising competencies for negotiation, bargaining, discipline, grievance and dispute resolution).
3. There are two separate models of managerial competence. The 'input model' follows Boyatzis' definition of competence, and defines and describes what a competent person brings to the task or job, e.g. knowledge or skill, or some

attribute such as a personality or character trait. This model is also referred to as 'person related'. The 'output model' or 'work related' model is concerned with specifying actual performance in the job. In practice the distinction is not always clear-cut.

4. For the purposes of the present course we define 'personal competencies' as: *'The competencies that must be mastered by the individual manager rather than being shared within a group or team'.*
5. A 'competency framework' is a structured collection of competencies used by an organisation to frame and underpin managerial activities, or, in the case of a professional body, to show the requirements for its qualified practitioners. A comprehensive framework of managerial competencies allows an organisation to identify gaps in managers' portfolios of skills and experience, and provides a 'road map' for future management development.
6. There is a logical hierarchy of competencies, in that complex management tasks require the application of a combination of less complex competencies. However, meta-competencies are not necessarily simpler in terms of content or ease of application than 'complex' or 'intermediate' ones. For example, leadership is one of the most difficult and important of all management activities.
7. Both 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' are vital to the effective development of professional managers.
8. The learning process for the *Managing Personal Competencies* course is a five-stage model comprising: (i) assessment of existing competency level; (ii) understanding the competency; (iii) applying the competency; (iv) feedback on performance; and (v) reflection and further development.

Review Questions

- 1.1 Define what we mean by 'skill' and 'competence'.
- 1.2 Define what we mean by 'personal managerial competencies'.
- 1.3 Give an example of (i) a meta-competency; (ii) an intermediate management competency; and (iii) a complex management competency.
- 1.4 Give an example of (i) a competency for people management; (ii) a competency relating to acquiring staff; and (iii) a competency relating to maintaining and developing staff.
- 1.5 Outline the learning process for competency development followed in this course.

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Meta-competencies

Module 2 Self-Awareness, Emotional Intelligence and Learning Styles

Module 3 Competencies for Self-Management

Module 4 Communication Competencies

Module 5 Leadership and Influencing Competency

Module 6 Managing the Performance of Others
