Outcome Based Training Needs Assessment

Training is a Performance Improvement Tool

Leaders frequently look at training as their # 1 performance improvement tool of choice despite the fact that it is just one of many alternatives. Every organization uses a system of performance management practices to accomplish its business outcomes and reach its goals. Other components of the system include standard operating procedures, technology, job design, performance incentives, management structure, etc. So why do leaders turn to training so readily and so frequently? Leaders turn to training for a variety of reasons — some are valid and others may not be.

Leaders who turn to training are acting on an implicit recognition that people are, in reality, the master key — the one that controls all the other components of performance. The choice of training recognizes that personal capability is, in the very least, a key driver of performance. Unless a person has the capability to perform, nothing else matters.

Competency Models Integrate Human Resource Practices

In years past human resource professionals talked about job requirements in terms of the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) required for effective performance. While this approached was helpful for screening job applicants, it often didn't align well with other elements of the performance management system, including performance evaluation, compensation or training and development.

> Competency models define the capabilities required for success. Each model varies based on its intended purpose. Some models are created to describe the behavior and attitudes that support the organization's culture. Other models describe the capabilities that support success in specific job roles. Models also vary in terms of their explication of technical versus soft skills. A model's usefulness depends, in a large measure, on clarity about its intended purpose when it is being developed

In recent years, managers have begun using the term *competency* as a synonym for capability, and HR professionals have replaced the concept of KSAs in favor of competencies. But the two ideas are not the same.

The competency approach recognizes that a person's capability to perform is tied to their:

- personality
- motivational profile, and
- attitudes

in addition to their KSAs.

Another differentiator from the KSA approach is that some competency models focus on the characteristics that distinguish excellent performers from average performers. Since some research has found that top performers out-produce average performers by a factor of 150%, the latter competency approach can be a very powerful tool for managers.

The competency revolution has also given managers and HR professionals a common language for discussing the basic building blocks of human performance and has enabled organizations to better integrate their human resource management practices, including:

- employee selection
- performance management
- compensation
- training and development
- succession planning

Now, it is common practice for organizations to build competency models to support all of their human resource management systems and they are often used to support culture change initiatives.

Competency-Based Training

Competency-based training seeks to develop the specific KSAs, behaviors, and attitudes that support the performance of job tasks and work processes. Many organizations have adopted competency-based training programs in order to:

- focus training and development on clear behavioral targets.
- link training programs to organizational outcomes.
- facilitate individual development planning.

Needs Analysis Using Competency Models

Organizations with competency models typically use them to assess their training and development needs. Needs analysis process entails identifying the gaps between the existing set competencies and the needed set of competencies.

Diagram 1
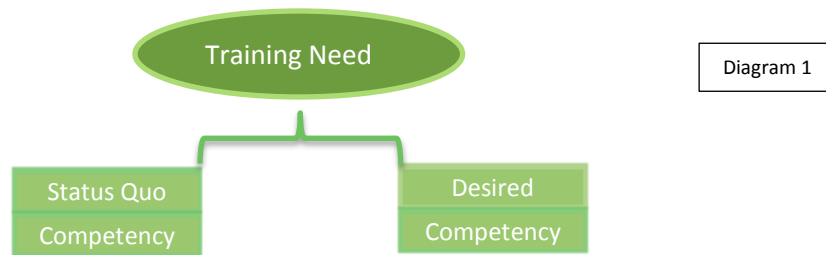
Overall, the focus on competencies has been a positive trend in human resource development. A drawback of some current competency modeling practices is that they are conducted without proper context. Frequently, competency models are developed by looking solely at what people do. That is, they are based on their job tasks and work processes, and sometimes, they are developed without even that context.

Diagram 2
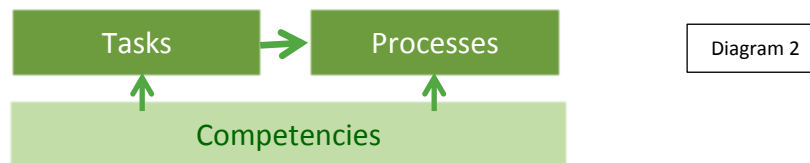
The result is that competencies become regarded as the target of development activities instead of being viewed as enablers of performance. In reality *performance should always be the objective of training*. This is the essential difference between education and training.

When competencies become the focus of training, learners walk way nourished, but training managers find it even more difficult to demonstrate actual performance improvement. This is true for three reasons

1) the link between proficiency in a competency and job performance is not fully made.
2) competencies are learned without an accompanying focus on using them to produce specific results.
3) the competency model may not fully or accurately describe the capabilities needed for the specific environment or to achieve the desired outcomes.

Unless a competency model is created based on well-defined mission related goals and outcomes, it is in danger of becoming a list of helpful but not strategically important competencies.

Outcome Based Competency Models

Outcome-based competency models and needs assessments processes focus on the organization's mission critical goals and the outcomes that are essential for achieving them. Processes and tasks are understood to be servants to the desired outcomes. Competencies are understood to be enablers for the performance of processes and tasks that produce the desired ***results within the specific culture of the work place.*** The culture is represented as "influences" in diagram 3.

Influences ⟷ Tasks → Processes → Outcomes → Goals

Competencies
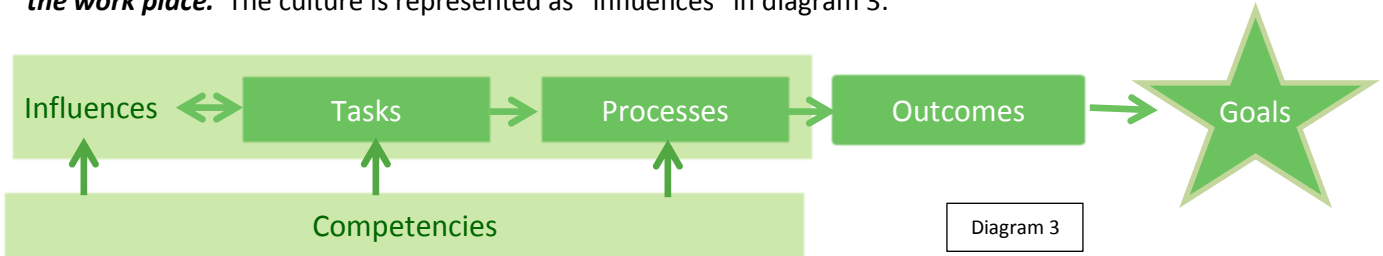
Diagram 3

As illustrated in diagram 4, the competency modeling process starts by identifying mission critical goals and the key outcomes that support them. It continues by tracing them backward to the key processes that produce the outcomes, then to the tasks that comprise the processes. Competencies are then identified by looking at those tasks and processes together with the outcomes and the cultural factors that influence performance. By maintaining this link in the competency modeling process, it is possible to closely integrate development programs with other elements of the organization's performance management system.

Influences ⟷ Tasks ← Processes ← Outcomes ← Goals

Competencies

Diagram 4
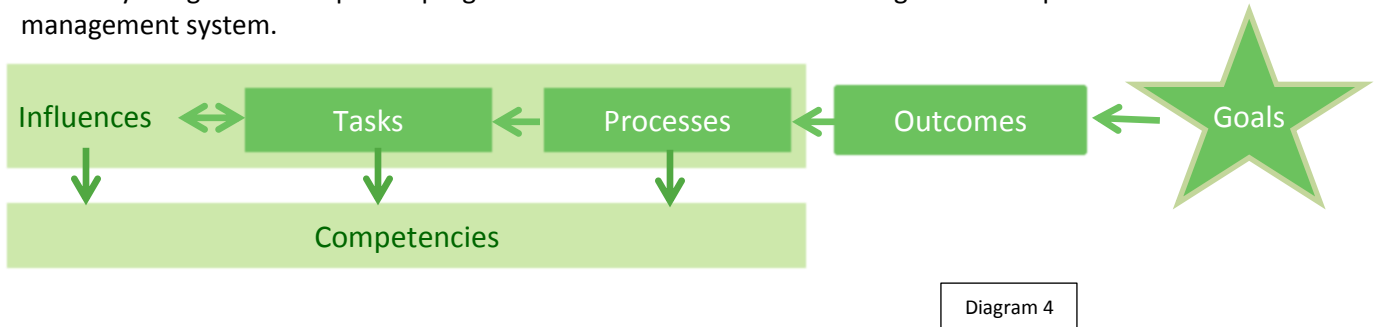
Outcomes-Based Needs Assessment

The needs assessment process in the outcome-based approach identifies both competency gaps and outcome gaps. By keeping these two in close association, training programs can be better targeted at improving competency levels and performance.

Training Need

Diagram 5

Status Quo
Outcomes
Competency

Desired
Outcomes
Competency
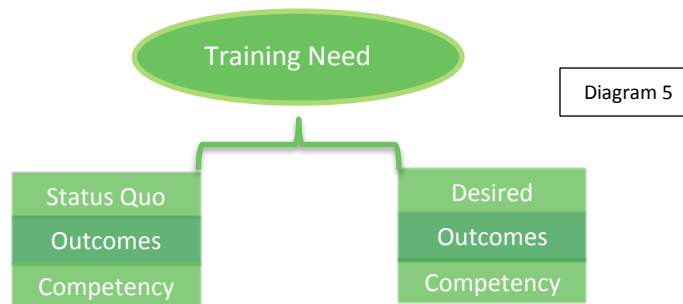
Outcome-Based Needs Analysis Strategic

The outcome based approach is strategically oriented in two ways: it focuses on
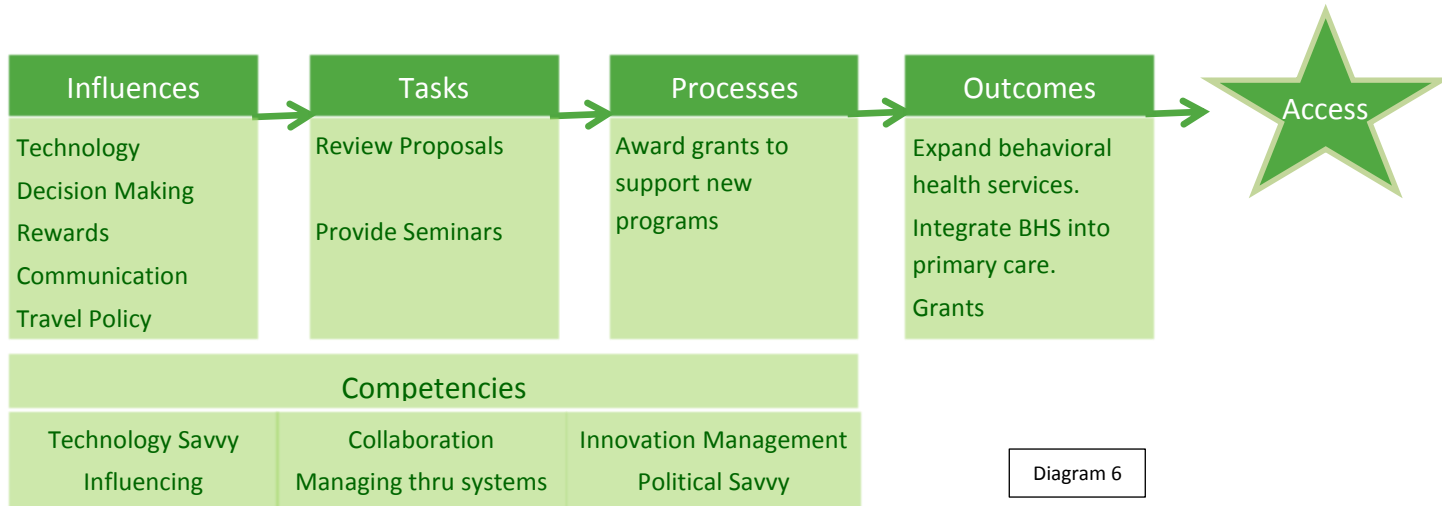
- outcomes that create value to the organization and its stakeholders.
- the definition of success for the future of the organization rather than the past or present.

While it looks to the future, this approach is easily modified to focus on short, mid and long-term goals.

An Example

Goals: Organizations are built to accomplish important things such *as improving access to quality health care and services.* An organization's goals must be accomplished in order for it to have ongoing value to its stakeholder communities.

Outcomes: Subgoals, such as *expanding behavioral health services and integrating them into primary care settings* are important outcomes because they are stepping stones for achieving the ultimate goal.

Influences	Tasks	Processes	Outcomes	Access
Technology	Review Proposals	Award grants to support new programs	Expand behavioral health services.	
Decision Making			Integrate BHS into primary care.	
Rewards	Provide Seminars			
Communication			Grants	
Travel Policy				

Competencies		
Technology Savvy	Collaboration	Innovation Management
Influencing	Managing thru systems	Political Savvy

Diagram 6

Processes are the coordinated work tasks needed to produce the desired outcomes such as *providing grants to support new programs.*

Tasks are the individual activities that comprise the processes, such as *reviewing proposals and providing seminars to inform healthcare professionals of grant opportunities.*

Influences such as technology in use, decision making processes, reward systems and communication patterns all affect how work is performed and its efficacy for driving towards important outcomes. In this example a restrictive travel policy may prohibit in-person seminars to healthcare professionals but technology resources may enable webinars and other types of remote communication.

Competencies: Outcome-based needs analysis views competencies as enablers of effective task and process performance in the context of organizational influencers, desired outcomes, and goals. It produces a different result than an analysis conducted without this context. In our prior example, this is illustrated by the identification of three competencies:

- *Technology Savvy,* which is essential for informing stakeholders without the capacity to meet them in person, as well as
- *Collaboration* and *Innovation Management* which are essential for integrating behavioral health services with the existing system.

A Process for Conducting an Outcome Based Needs Assessment

This process begins after the commitment to the Needs Assessment and implementing corresponding program has been established.

Purpose: Establish the job/role competencies required for excellent performance. These competencies will be used to distinguish excellent job candidates from qualified candidates, for performance management and coaching, and for training and development.

Step One: Identify the primary occupation in the organization

- Begin with the primary occupation because it tends to shape the culture and practices in the work place. It is also likely to comprise the largest segment employees, and therefore your primary customer group.

Step Two: Interview senior leaders (of primary occupation)

- Interview senior leaders to affirm their commitment to needs assessment; determine the strategic goals and outcomes of their organization.
- Identify: the key processes for achieving those outcomes, the gap between current and desired outcomes, and their top performers.
- Discuss perceived training needs as one input into the analysis.

Step Three: Interview mid-level Leaders

- Repeat the senior leader interview process. A comparison of the answers will inform your training recommendations. Differences may indicate that alignment is needed before or rather than development programs

Step Four: Interview employees

- Interview a few employees; large numbers of interviews may not be necessary.
- Identify the top three: outcomes they pursue, processes they use, and tasks they perform.
- Discuss the competencies required.
- Track the differences in responses from top performers versus others. Those differences will point to both differentiating competencies and to training needs.
- Ask top performers what makes them different and what novice employees need to learn.

Step Five: Map-out results and share with leaders in working session

- Map-out results of senior leader versus mid leaders versus top performers versus other performers.
- Discuss implications of areas of alignment and misalignment for the implementation of different performance improvement practices – including but not limited to development programs.
- Identify how to integrate those practices. Present a preliminary list of competencies for discussion.

Step Six: Refine competency list and definitions; share with top performers.

- Propose a draft competency model to top performers.
- Refine the list and definitions with them. Confirm performance and competency gaps.
- Collect input on how to construct training experiences that link the proficiency to real-life outcomes.

Summary

Competency models help organizations to integrate their performance management practices and realize the gains from the synergies of integration. Competency-based training can be a very powerful development tool when competencies are properly identified — as servants of key outcomes and strategic goals. The outcomes-based approach to training needs analysis incorporates all the benefits of competency-based approaches while retaining focus on the results that create success and considering the contextual influencers. This approach is by nature focused on supporting strategic objectives (i.e., future performance) but is equally valuable for identifying competencies needed for tactical, immediate, and short-term performance.