



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Use the Competency Checklist for Better Performance Coaching

by David C. Miller

Many professionals enter management positions without any training on how to develop people.

Managers often struggle with questions like these:

- How do I identify what to coach my employee on?
- How do I handle the awkward situation where my employee feels deserving of a promotion, but I don't think he or she is ready yet?
- What's the best way to raise the employee's awareness of his or her strengths and weaknesses without hurting self-esteem and morale?
- How can we move constructively from this type of performance discussion to create a development plan?

There's a simple tool that can help managers be effective at navigating these issues. I call it the competency checklist.

Methodology

Let's say you want to effectively coach one of your direct reports named John. You want to collaborate with John on what areas to work on, but you're nervous about how to bring up these areas. Try following these steps:

Step 1: Brainstorm a list of competencies that must be present for John to be performing at the "next level." Do this with John. Say, "John, I know you really want to get promoted to VP this year. Let's brainstorm all the competencies that someone at the VP-level must demonstrate consistently."

So, together, you and John brainstorm 10 to 12 categories, such as, *managing a staff of 10 or more, effectively managing time, excellent presentation skills, ability to plan and implement large projects on his own, takes initiative, creates opportunities for*

the organization, etc. Your list should encompass all the key qualities you want in a VP.

Step 2: Take a few minutes for each of you to assess John's current mastery of these competencies on a scale of 1 to 10. With "10" being stellar and "1" being far below expectations, rate how John is currently performing each of these qualities. At the same time, John is independently rating himself. Make sure you and John do this separately.

Step 3: Review John's self assessment. Identify and discuss the clear strengths and gaps. You will get an idea of where John believes he is performing well and where he needs to improve.

Step 4: Compare your list to John's and discuss any discrepancies. I suggest doing each item one at a time. For example, "John, how did you rate yourself on taking initiative?" John will explain his rating and why he scored himself this way. Then you can reveal your assessment.

Then discuss any differences in perceptions. If John believes he's a "9" when it comes to taking initiative and you believe he's a "4", we now know there's a clear gap in perception. John may lack the self-awareness of how he's performing or he may not sufficiently understand your expectations about what "taking initiative" looks like in his position.

It's important that you give John some specific examples of where he fell short on taking initiative. Talk through what a "9" looks like for you in this category.

It's also possible that you haven't done an adequate enough job communicating your expectations. Here's your chance to clean that up and clarify them.



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Step 5: Summarize and get clear on what needs to happen for John to achieve his desired position. Make sure you and John are on the same page. Develop clear measurements, whether quantitative or qualitative, that will let you and John both be able to assess whether he's performing on that level or not.

Many managers struggle to get this kind of clarity, saying "it's too subjective." Personally, I believe this is a cop-out. If we can't define the level of performance for our direct reports clearly, how can we expect them to achieve these levels?

Step 6: Select one to three competencies to work on over the next three to six months. Work with John to mutually identify and agree on the areas that will make the biggest difference in his performance. Design a development plan with John. Include milestones: "Here's where you want to be six weeks from now." Agree on what steps he will take in the next week or two to make progress on these goals.

Step 7: Coach and hold John accountable. Once you set up the development plan, it's John's job to execute it to the best of his ability, and it's your job as manager to support John and hold him accountable. You will want to have formal coaching meetings either once per week or once every other week. In these sessions, you want to review progress and give real-time feedback.

Summary

The competency checklist is a simple and useful structure for ongoing development and feedback. It's also effective at developing self-awareness in your staff members. If you do this at the beginning of the year with all of your direct reports, it will make annual performance discussions more relevant and easy to do. More importantly, it will eliminate communication gaps about performance expectations and set up an ongoing coaching dialogue that will dramatically raise the effectiveness and cohesiveness of your team. □

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