

Competency Modeling and Culture Change: Reinvigorating a Culture of Student Professionalism and Career Readiness Preparation in a Business College

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Abstract: Over the past decade, many organizations have moved to competency-based approaches in the design of the overall talent management system. This trend is evident in a number of disciplines and particularly relevant for business fields. This article describes the approach that was used in developing a career readiness and preparation program for the business school of a regional university located in the southeast. The step-by-step modeling process employed is drawn from best practice competency theory from business and industry.

Key words: post-college career readiness, competencies, professional skills

1. Introduction

The goal of business education is to graduate students who have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the demands of organizations as business professionals. In one College of Business located in the southeast, the development of career readiness as a core deliverable was identified as a strategic goal for the college. As a result, the leadership team engaged in an organizational development initiative, designed to promote an intensive, purposeful career readiness and professional culture for organizational stakeholders.

We formed a college-wide task force with three major objectives: (1) Analyze existing processes for student career preparation, (2) propose processes to enhance a culture of career preparation for students in the business college, and (3) propose processes to increase employer awareness and attendance at student recruitment programs. In accomplishing our charge, we turned to one tool commonly used by industry in aligning performance with goals, competency modeling.

Competency-based approaches to talent management programs provide a direct linkage between the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for successful job performance to basic human resources functions such as recruitment, selection, training and development, compensation, and succession planning. While this may seem to be a basic tenet of human resource development design, the architecture of many organization's systems either evolved or developed in an ad hoc manner in response to environmental demands. Competency-based systems require an on-going, systematic assessment of the knowledge, skills, and attributes needed and result in more relevant tools and application of these human resources activities. In addition, a broad base of organizational

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stakeholders are involved with the undertaking, empowering them to participate in the change.

This paper will discuss the process of developing a competency-based program to drive the desired cultural changes at the business college. First, I will describe the overarching concern of culture. Next, I will explain the competency model development process, linking the desired competencies with core business school values and goals. Finally, an overview of the integration strategies recommended to weave the competency model information into actionable items will be provided.

2. Culture as a Foundation for the Competency Model

Organizational culture is “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1993, p. 373). One approach to cultural change is the development and introduction of a new cultural frame or a mechanism for creating shared meanings held by individuals (Howard-Greenville, 2003). These frames are constructed and maintained through a collective process of sense-making. In the case of the Southeast College of Business, a proposed new Professionalism Competency Model serves as the new cultural frame to drive the change process. Changing or building a new culture is not an easy endeavor for leaders in educational organizations. To do so, we must understand the parts of organizational culture impacted by a new cultural frame.

Organizational culture includes the habits, attitudes, and deep-seated values of the organization. Schein (1993) proposes three levels exist including artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions (1993). Artifacts are tangible or verbally identified elements within an organization. In an educational institution, these include elements such as programs and courses offered, signage, methods of instruction, and history. Espoused values are the organization’s formal or derived cultural elements that are stated. Most often these come from top leadership within an organization and include items such as the core values statement, instructional goals and focus areas directives, and code of conduct policies. Assumptions are the actual values of the organization. These are often the most difficult to recognize from within and are unconscious. The assumptions are the unstated norms representing “how things are really done here”.

Driving cultural change must address all three of these levels. It is not enough to create programs that are visible at the artifacts or espoused values levels. It is necessary to create new assumptions. To accomplish this, we developed a Professionalism Competency Model to serve as a new frame of reference to guide our change activities. An overview of the model is provided in Figure 1. Next, I will provide an overview and explanation of the Professional Competency Model.

3. Overview of the Professionalism Competency Model

A competency is a measureable element of human capability that is necessary for the successful performance of a job, process or activity and may consist of knowledge, skills, abilities, or personal characteristics. Competency models refer to collections of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that are needed for effective performance in the jobs or activity in question (Campion, Fink, Ruggerberg, Carr, Phillips, & Odman, 2011; Marelli, 1998; McClelland, 1998; Vazirani, 2010). The individual KSAOs or combinations of KSAOs are the competencies, and the set of competencies are typically referred to as a competency model. While

work activities or job responsibilities comprise the “what” of job performance, competencies reflect the “how” of job performance. The competency model provides the structure or framework for understanding and applying these competencies.

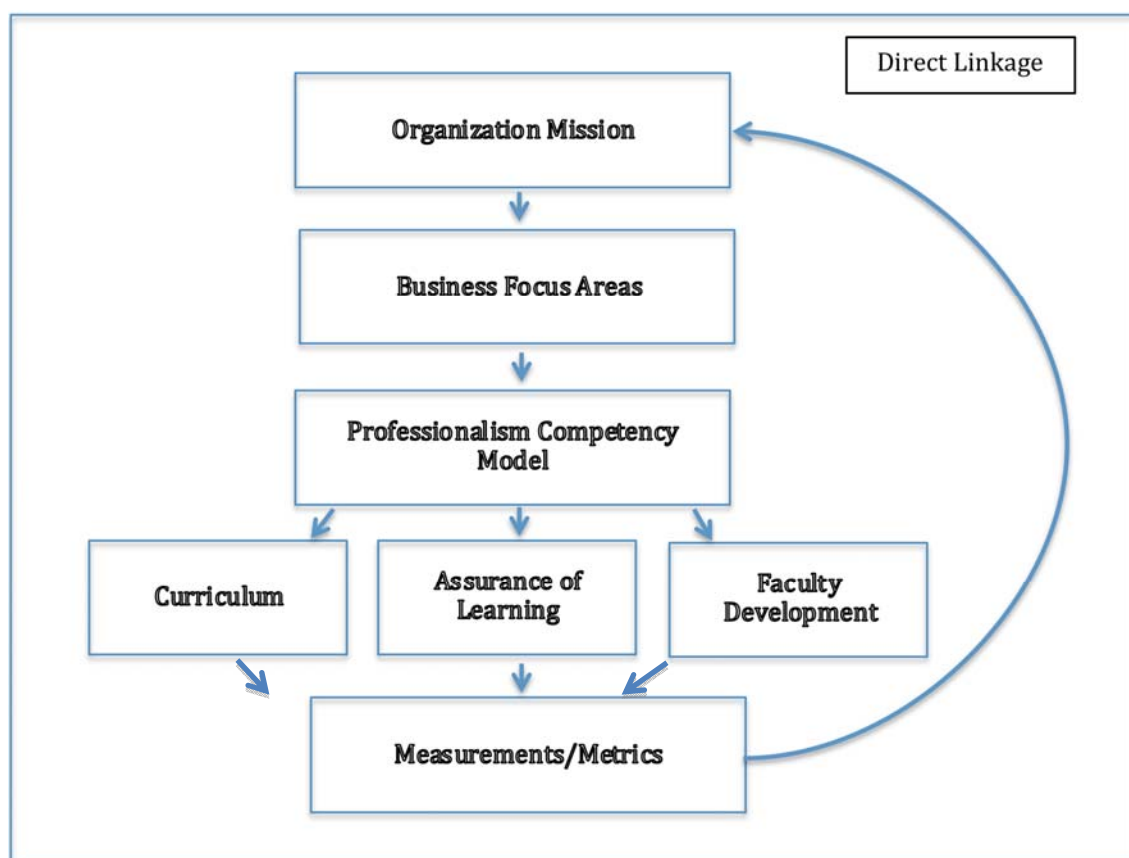


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for the Professionalism Competency Model

To develop the Professionalism Competency Model, we engaged in a multi-step model as recommended in the literature (Campion, Fink, Ruggerberg, Carr, Phillips, & Odman, 2011; Marelli, Tondora, & Hoge, 2005; McClelland, 1973). First, we defined the objectives for the model which were (1) to create a common vocabulary for faculty and students, (2) provide a structure for competency development and curricular activities, and (3) undergird the systemic view of career readiness as a competitive advantage of the college.

Second, we analyzed the mission of the organization and the key business focus areas established by the faculty and administrative council of the college. These areas serve as drivers for the college that undergird programmatic and curricular activities. The Business Focus areas include: (1) functional independence/global environment of business, (2) values conducive to personal and professional development, (3) development of reasoning, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills, (4) awareness of ethics and the importance of ethical decision-making, (5) knowledge and application of current information systems and technology, (6) effective listening, speaking, and writing skills, and (7) professional and personal quality improvement and lifelong learning.

Third, using existing competency frameworks as a guide, we defined one to four competencies for each focus area to create the Professionalism Competency Model (see Table 1). Each competency identified represents the

knowledge, skills, and or attitudes required for effective performance in demonstrating positive outcomes in the focus area. Guidelines suggest that manageable competency models consist of twenty or less competencies (Campion et al., 2011). For the Professionalism Competency model we included fifteen competencies that corresponded with seven Business College focus areas.

To provide a common understanding of the competencies for organizational stakeholders, we defined each of them and created a Competency Library. Sample entries from the Competency Library are included in Table 2: Competency Library. The competency library information serves as a resource for future integration and application activities as we continue alignment with existing systems such as curricular modification, assurance of learning activities, faculty development, and other measurement and metrics elements of the college.

Table1 Professionalism Competency Model

Business College Focus Area	Competencies Identified
Functional independence/global environment of business	Cross cultural agility
Values conducive to personal and professional development	Career ambition, goal-setting, planning/organizing
Development of reasoning, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills	Problem-solving, priority setting
Awareness of ethics and the importance of ethical decision-making	Ethics and values
Knowledge and application of current information systems and technology	Contributing to team success, team leadership
Effective listening, speaking, and writing skills	Collaboration, written communication, formal presentation skills,
Professional and personal quality improvement and lifelong learning.	Work-Life balance

Table 2 Sample Competency Library

Competency	Definition
Building Positive Working Relationships	Develops and uses collaborative relationships to accomplish goals and objectives of the work activity
Collaboration	Works effectively and cooperatively with others; establishes and maintains good working relationships with colleagues
Formal Presentation Skills	Presents ideas effectively (including nonverbal and visuals) to audiences
Planning and Organizing	Establishes course of action for self and others to ensure that activities are completed efficiently and effectively
Priority Setting	Plans and exercises conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities, to increase effectiveness, efficiency, productivity and goal achievement
Problem-solving	Uses rigorous logic and methods to solve difficult problems with effective solutions; investigates all fruitful sources for answers
Team Development	Uses appropriate methods and interpersonal styles to develop, motivate, and guide a team toward the successful completion of a program/project
Team Leadership	The ability to take on the leadership role to build a high performing team by keeping the team focusing, motivated and inspired to achieve organizational objectives

To verify and validate the Professionalism Competency Model, we conducted three separate focus groups comprised of the following: (1) subject matter experts, (2) faculty, and (3) student support services staff. As recommended by the literature, the panels reviewed the Professionalism Competency Model and the Competency Library, made suggestions, and validated the content (Barbour & Kitinger, 1999; Bloor, Thomas, & Robson, 2001).

4. Applying the Model

While the overall career readiness and professionalism cultural change initiative includes a number of

components, planned over several years, one of the first recommendations was to develop a certificate program in Advanced Professionalism. A cross-college committee proposed requirements of the certificate to include a three-course sequence, as well as a number of co-curricular activities.

A Competency Map to the Curriculum was created and used as the basis for course selection and in some cases, course design (see Table 3). The committee reviewed existing course syllabi, discussed fit and utility, and determined the engagement points for each of the identified competencies in the curriculum. In future stages of curriculum development, the map serves as an invaluable resource in linking the course content, and ultimately the competency model with the outcomes of the courses and the certificate program. This method should provide consistency and alignment between the certificate program and the overall goals of the college to provide value-added career readiness and professionalism education to students at the college.

Table 3 Competency Map to the Curriculum

Competency	BA 175 Freshman Exp	MGT 210 Intro to Mgt	MGT 361 Bus Com	BA 490 Prof Exp	LEAD 440 Leading Teams	ACCT 390 ECON 490 ENT 490 FIN 440/490 MGT 490 MKT 490
Building Positive Working Relationships	X		X		X	X
Career Ambition	X	X	X	X		X
Career Goal-setting		X		X		X
Collaboration			X		X	
Contributing to Team Success			X		X	X
Cross-cultural Agility		X	X			
Communication (business, written)		X	X	X	X	X
Formal Presentation		X	X			
Planning and Organizing	X	X		X		
Priority Setting	X	X	X			
Problem Solving		X				
Team Leadership			X		X	

5. Implications for Practice

The economic downturn of the past several years created new challenges for graduate of business colleges, as competition for jobs intensified with a widespread contraction of jobs and significant cutbacks in campus recruiting efforts. From the standpoint of preparation, this environment requires business colleges to rethink how best to adapt to the changing dynamics of corporate America. The approach described in this paper is one way that a business school mirrored methods and techniques common in industry to design a cultural change process.

There are three strengths to this approach. First, the process requires wide engagement of organizational stakeholders. We recognize through information reported in the media and from organizational stakeholders that career readiness and professionalism are key concerns for our graduates. The identification and articulation of the competencies required to support these concerns is important, but even more so, is the broad-based awareness of the faculty, staff, and students. The process of developing the competency model included these constituents at all

levels and helped to create buy-in. Second, the Professionalism Competency Model has utility for integration throughout the curriculum. Further development of the model will yield information for creating measurements that will align with existing college processes and systems, such as assurance of learning activities. In this way, the advancement of career readiness and professionalism will become integrated into the fabric of the college integral to the outcomes and evaluation system of the college. Third, the competency modeling approach is flexible in meeting the future demands and goals of the college. Rather than creating a “one shot” model for adaptation, competency modeling offers opportunities for revision as needs arise.

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