



LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY MODELS: WHY MANY ARE FAILING AND HOW TO MAKE THEM FLOURISH

by Jim Clemmer

Most progressive organizations today are using leadership competency models to outline the key skills and behaviors they want to see in their supervisors, managers, and executives. Leadership competency models can provide a structured framework for defining and developing those behaviors that have the biggest impact on an organization's performance. Used effectively, they become a roadmap to dramatically higher leadership effectiveness.

There is a decades-long history of failed organization initiatives. Dozens of studies have shown that 50 - 70% of organization improvement initiatives like customer service, leadership development, performance management systems, restructuring, quality improvement, etc. have failed. The implementation of leadership competency models is clearly heading toward that same cliff.

Six Reasons Many Leadership Competency Models Are Failing

1. Out of Thin Air

We've been guilty of facilitating workshops with management teams pulling competencies out of thin air. In one case, we had 140 of the organization's top leaders in an offsite retreat go through a shifting process to identify and vote on their top 10 competencies. The descriptions of each one were then crafted by a small group of leaders based on the blizzard of Post-It-Notes grouped around each of the competency clusters. Some organizations shuffle, sift, and prioritize card decks listing generic competency sets.

As I outlined in "[Leadership Lessons from Evidence-Based Medicine](#)," what's missing is proof that these competencies matter to

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the organization. Where is the empirical data that these are the key behaviors that have the greatest impact on employee engagement, attraction and retention, customer service levels, quality, innovation, safety, productivity, sales, and profits? How do we know we have the right competencies?

2. It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's SuperLeader!

Many leadership competency models provide a series of behavioral descriptions clustered around 6 to 16 or more headings. If they're relevant and well written, the descriptions are very helpful. What's implied is that the pathway to peak performance is improvement across dozens of skills and behaviors.

This pathway to perfection is overwhelming and completely unrealistic. At best, leadership development that's a mile wide and an inch deep moves a leader from good to a bit better. More often, motivation to develop and follow a personal development plan to become SuperLeader fizzles out and crashes.

3. One Size Fits All

Most competency models weight all the competencies and dozens of underlying behaviors equally. Some models layer the competencies across organizational levels starting with frontline staff, and moving up to supervisors, managers, and executives.

This SuperLeader model doesn't account for vast variances in individual preferences across leaders or their widely differing functions. Each of us mere mortals is a unique mixture of strengths and weaknesses.



We have work areas that play to our passions and turn us on and areas that are a real chore and turn us off. One-size-fits-all competency models don't account for those differences.

For example, a supervisor, manager, or executive in accounting or IT will have a very different set of competencies and passions leading to their successful leadership than someone in sales or customer service. Competencies such as analytical and problem solving or technical/professional expertise versus those of communication or building relationships take on a different weight for each role. And each competency plays quite differently to the natural strengths and weaknesses of each leader and the personal preferences that motivated him or her to choose their field or profession.

4. The Way of the Weakness

We're largely unconscious of how we equate improvement, development, and personal growth with finding and fixing weaknesses. Improving low marks is deeply socialized in us going way back to our school report cards. When a leader gets a 360 feedback report from his or her direct reports, peers, manager, and others the natural instinct is to quickly skip past positive ratings and comments and look at "where I need to improve."

Our research shows unless there's a Fatal Flaw needing immediate attention, this is badly off track. The best that MIGHT happen is the leader raises a few of his or her competencies from poor to average.

Our research also shows that leaders who focus on their weaknesses consistently create weaker development plans, allocate less of their time to personal growth, and abandon training efforts more quickly. In one study we found executives working on weaknesses reported their leadership improvement efforts had minimal impact on business results and even less effect on the commitment or engagement levels of their direct reports.

5. Here Comes the Judge

In the dark ages of medicine sick patients were often bled under the badly misguided belief that bloodletting released toxins ("humors") and restored the body's proper

balance. This unscientific — and sometimes deadly — practice often left patients weaker and less able to fight off their illness.

If a leader's raters know that the leader's boss will be seeing the assessment results they will change their ratings. And the entire process is transformed from development to evaluation. Now the conversation between boss and the rated leader generally moves toward performance bloodletting. After a cursory acknowledgement of strengths — and under the misguided belief they are holding the leader "accountable" — most bosses (often with poor coaching skills) will focus in on weaknesses and demand the leader address and improve these. It's little wonder many performance appraisals are put off and approached with as much enthusiasm as a medieval doctor's house call.

6. Performance (Mis)Management Systems

Too many HR departments and executives confuse competencies and performance outcomes. They'll use competency models to try evaluating and holding supervisors, managers, and executives accountable for all of the competencies and the dozens of behaviors describing each one.

Effective performance management holds people accountable for delivering results. These targets are the "what" and might include sales, margins, profits, new products/services, project implementation, production levels, service/quality levels, productivity rates, budget numbers, and the like. Well designed and well researched competency maps provide pathways for the "how" to reach these performance goals.

The BIG CAVEAT is that both the "what" and the "how" must be delivered within the bounds of core organizational values. Delivering results while destroying the environment, risking safety, reducing customer satisfaction, or destroying teamwork, is unacceptable.



Five Keys to Make Leadership Competency Models Flourish

Jack Zenger, Joe Folkman, and their team have compiled a huge body of research on the best practices for developing and effectively using leadership competency models:

1. What Really Matters: Correlate Competencies to Performance Outcomes

Highly effective leaders have a dramatic impact on morale, teamwork, engagement, innovation, customer satisfaction, quality, productivity, safety, sales, and profits. But which behaviors have the greatest impact?

Zenger Folkman’s research began with looking at survey responses from over 200,000 raters of more than 20,000 leaders. Each of the data sets represented different customized 360 surveys from a wide variety of organizations across dozens of sectors with nearly 2,000 behavioral descriptions or survey items. They searched for the competencies that sharply delineated the top 10 percent from the bottom 10 percent of leaders by their performance outcomes.

This scientific search for the key leadership competencies identified 16 competencies in five clusters:

Differentiating Competencies				
Focus on Results <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drives for Results • Establishes Stretch Goals • Takes Initiative 	Leading Change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops Strategic Perspective • Champions Change • Connects the Group to the Outside World 	Character <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displays High Integrity and Honesty 	Interpersonal Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates Powerfully and Prolifically • Inspires and Motivates Others to High Performance • Builds Relationships • Develops Others • Collaboration and Teamwork 	Personal Capability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical/ Professional Expertise • Solves Problems and Analyzes Issues • Innovates • Practices Self-Development

Using our deep research data base we’ll often help organizations adapt their own customized competency models. The key is validating their competencies and descriptions with research that these behaviors have the greatest impact on performance results.

2. Don’t Try to Do it All: Build 3- 5 Competencies from Good to Great

Extraordinary leaders rated at the 90th percentile deliver outstanding performance results that are 3 - 20 times higher than those at the 10th percentile. And top performing leaders deliver results that are double or more than average or good leaders rated at the 50th or 60th percentile.

The best news is that extraordinary leaders don’t need to be SuperLeaders excelling at all competencies to perform at the 80th and 90th percentiles. Improving just three to five of sixteen competencies from good to great will do it. And it doesn’t really matter which competencies we choose. So we can pick those that are natural strengths, are most relevant to our job, and we’re most energized about developing further.



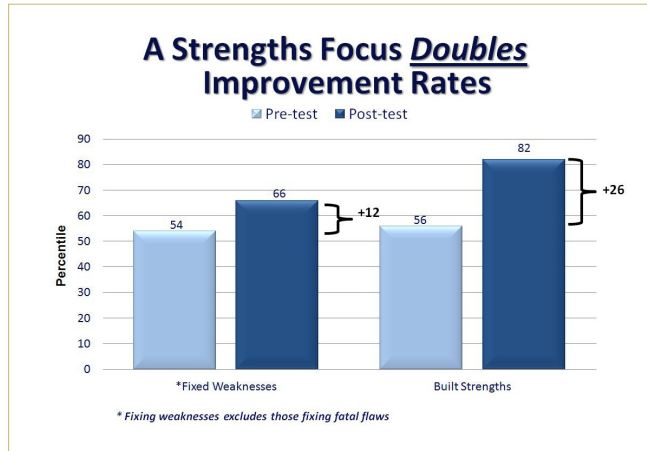
3. Develop Towering Strengths to Overshadow Weaknesses

Think of the best leader you know personally. What are this leader’s three to five most profound strengths? Did he or she have any weaknesses or areas at which he or she did not excel? What kept those weaknesses for undermining his or her overall impact?

Perfect leaders don’t exist. Leaders who excel at the 90th percentile across all competencies are exceedingly rare. Leadership development that comes across as the pursuit of perfection (“here are the pages and pages of competencies and behaviors you must excel at to be an outstanding leader”) is often de-motivating.



Leadership development that looks to magnify a smaller number of natural strengths that really make a difference is highly energizing. That's why rates of personal growth, leadership development, and improvement double!



4. Use Competency Models for Building and Developing

The sole purpose of a leadership competency model is to help leaders improve their effectiveness. A **Strengths-Based Leadership Development System** built on a relevant and validated competency model is a roadmap to higher performance. Like a GPS mapping device, the competency framework and 360 feedback assessment help a leader identify where he or she is now and which routes will take them to their next performance level.

Companion Competency mapping is a very critical element in this approach. This guides leaders in using **strengths cross-training** to plot their improvement journey. Here's one of our studies illustrating the dramatic difference of using competencies and 360 feedback to build strengths versus finding and fixing weaknesses:

The Powerful Impact of Building Strengths

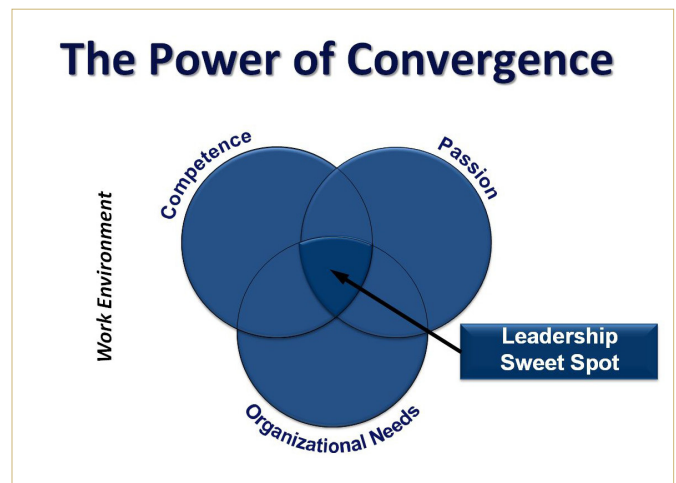
Executives Responded to These Statements:	Build Strength	Fix Weakness
I have created an excellent development plan that will guide my efforts to improve.	63%	13%
As a result of my use of the 360 feedback process, report, and tools, I feel that I have improved in my overall leadership effectiveness.	72%	38%
I feel that I have moved forward on improving the specific issues on my development plan.	68%	43%
I have taken the time and made a real effort to work on my development plan.	60%	38%

The one exception to focusing on strengths is if a 360 assessment shows the leader has a Fatal Flaw. That's a competency which is important to the leader's job and he or she is performing so poorly that others can't see past the glare of this gap to his or her strengths. When that's the case, the leader needs to get to focus all improvement energy here.

5. Evaluate Performance Results (the What) Not Competencies (the How)

U.S. General George S. Patton delivered big results in World War Two. Under his leadership his army advanced further, captured more enemy prisoners, and liberated more territory in less time than any other army in history. A German field marshal speaking to American reporters called Patton "your best general." Patton once articulated a key element in his performance management approach; *"Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."*

Effective performance management systems identify what to do. They set clear targets and measurement of success. An effective **strengths-based leadership competency model** helps people apply their ingenuity in playing to their passions and leveraging their natural strengths to meet organizational needs specific to their role.





Further Reading:

- [Free e-book](#) (with short embedded video clips featuring Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman) “[Organizations Flourish with Strong Leaders](#)”
- [How to Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths](#)
- Chapter Four, “The Competency Quest” of [The Extraordinary Leader](#)
- “[Manifesto for a Leadership Development Revolution](#)”
- Recommended White Papers in the [Leadership Resource Center](#) (freely available once registered):
 - “Extraordinary Leader 360 Survey: Validation and Reliability”
 - “How Extraordinary Leaders Double Profits”
 - “Leadership 6.0: Connecting Leadership Development with Drivers of Business Results”
 - “The 11 Components of a Best-in-Class 360-Degree Assessment”
 - “Make Performance Appraisals an Inspiring Event”
- [Strengths-Based Leadership Development System](#)

JIM CLEMMER

For over three decades Jim Clemmer’s [keynote presentations](#), [workshops](#), [management team retreats](#), [seven bestselling books](#) translated into many languages, [articles](#), [blog](#), and [newsletters](#) have helped hundreds of thousands of people worldwide.

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The CLEMMER Group is [Zenger Folkman’s](#) Canadian Strategic Partner. Jim was co-founder of The Achieve Group (which became Canada’s largest leadership training firm) when they worked with Jack’s previous company, Zenger Miller. [Zenger Folkman](#) is an award-winning firm best known for its unique evidence-driven, strengths-based system for developing extraordinary leaders and demonstrating the performance impact they have on organizations.