Filling the Leadership Pipeline

Introduction

The leadership pipeline, like a fuel pipeline, must have continually renewing stores of resources available when the existing supply of leaders runs low. Baby Boomer retirements, lack of focus on leadership development and the on-going restructuring of corporations world-wide have exhausted the leadership pipeline.

By creating a unique and customized leadership competency model, you are bolstering the quality and quantity of your leadership team – filling the leadership pipeline. Leadership competencies are the specific behaviors and skills that exemplify leadership excellence and drive high performance in your organization. These competencies should always be created with your unique organization and strategic direction in mind.

The Expectation of Leadership

Organizations of all types and sizes rarely have a common description of leadership excellence. In most cases the *expectation* of leadership excellence is real and marketed as an organizational strength, but many senior leaders relegate the exact and precise definition of leadership excellence to the shadows of business journals or business "common sense."

Through the process of developing and employing a customized competency model, an organization defines their unique gold standard of performance. An additional benefit of a competency model is that it can be defined clearly and communicated simply – taking ambiguity and buzz words out of the equation. Our experience with clients and research initiatives points to five best practices that should be present in any effort to develop a customized competency model.

Top Five Best Practices for Developing Leadership Competencies

The following benefit chart identifies the five best practices for developing a competency model and the related benefit to organizations.

Best Practice	Benefit
#1. Consult the Strategic Plan.	The Strategic Plan is the foundation, driver and keeper of the leadership competency model – linking expectations of the organization to that of its leaders.
#2. Develop Competency Streams.	Competency streams ensure every leadership level has a relevant set of competencies based upon and residing within the full progressive model.
#3. Operationalize Competency Statements.	Competency statements are measurable and expectations are clear.
#4. Validate the Competency Model.	The validation process helps to determine whether the competency model is driving results within your organization.
#5. Market the Leadership Brand.	The leadership brand drives positive perceptions of the organization's leadership team and helps to recruit leaders that fit the organization.

Best Practice #1: Consult the Strategic Plan

The first, most critical step in the development of a customized competency model is to gain a thorough understanding of your organization's strategic direction and its related leadership expectations. By beginning the process with the strategic plan, you are setting a foundation based on your organization's true north. The strategic plan drives the process of defining exact leadership behaviors and skills.

Even a solid, sound and robust strategic plan may not provide a complete picture of leadership expectations. Filling the gaps can be accomplished by gathering feedback from the leadership team on their definition of leadership excellence. By going straight to the leadership team you create a more complete picture of leadership excellence specific to your organization.
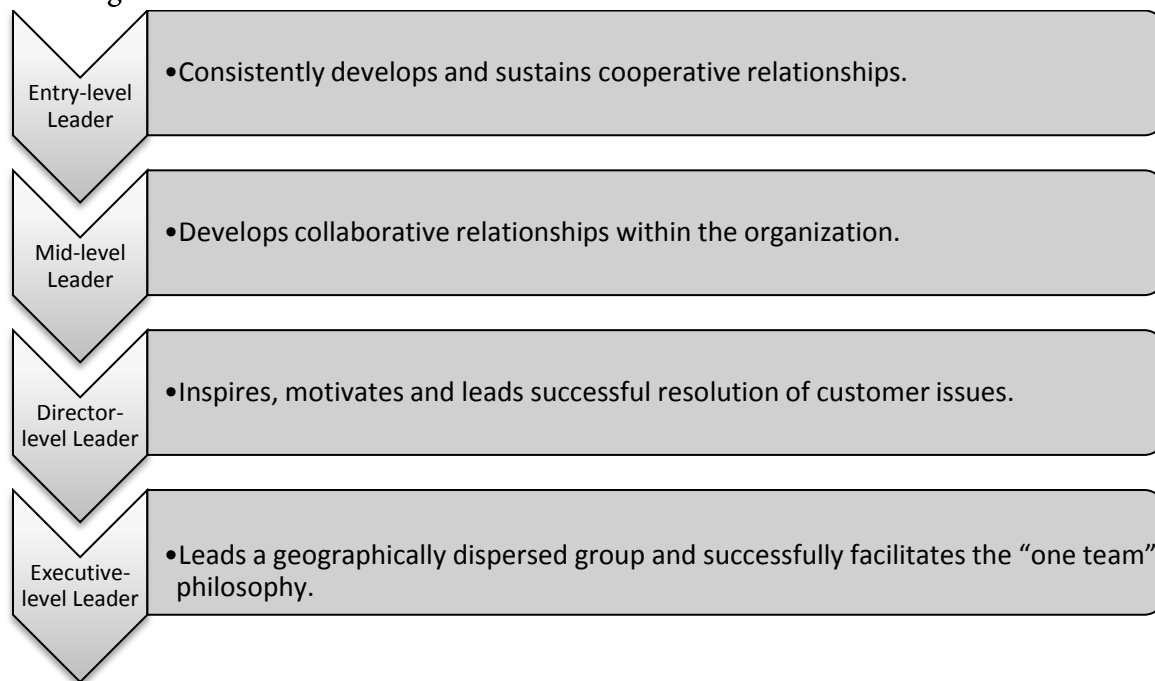
Interviews or focus groups, conducted with leaders from all departments and leadership levels, provide information often not found within the strategic plan document. An interview guide helps the interviewer stay focused, but allows flexibility to encourage answers rich in information. Example questions might include:

- What are the minimum requirements that a leader in your organization needs to possess in order to excel?

- What is the profile of a successful leader in your organization? What qualities do the successful leaders possess?

- What is missing or stands out about the leaders that are not successful?

Benchmarking is also an excellent way to augment the data gathering process. Benchmarking should be conducted both *inside and outside* your industry. The goal is to find competency information that can be applied to your organization. For example, a common competency found in healthcare professional circles is the ability to show empathy for patients – language and nuances from this competency can easily be applied to customer service professionals. Benchmarking also provides important secondary validation of the information gathered from the strategic plan and interviews.

Best Practice #2: Develop Competency Streams

As a leader progresses through the organization earning promotions and achieving higher levels of leadership responsibility, it is appropriate and important that the requirements of that leader continue to grow in proportion. This is where the concept of competency streams becomes salient – each competency stream is delineated by the level of the organization and each level builds on the previous level. For example, competency in "teamwork" might progress in the following manner:

Entry-level Leader	•Consistently develops and sustains cooperative relationships.
Mid-level Leader	•Develops collaborative relationships within the organization.
Director-level Leader	•Inspires, motivates and leads successful resolution of customer issues.
Executive-level Leader	•Leads a geographically dispersed group and successfully facilitates the "one team" philosophy.

Best Practice #3: Operationalize Competency Statements

Competency statements at their best drive excellence and at their worst are akin to an esoteric mission statement – a statement eloquently written but easily ignored. The bottom line is that competency statements must be measurable. To operationalize a competency statement means to explain why demonstrating the behavior or skill has business relevance, i.e. is measurable. The "so that" method demonstrates the concept of operationalized statements. For example:

Competency Statement	Operationalized Competency Statement
Striving to do work more efficiently and effectively.	Striving to do work more efficiently and effectively **so that** our product quality is measured at the level of 25 or fewer defects per 1000.
Enables team members to take ownership of their work and celebrates their successes.	Enables team members to take ownership of their work and celebrates their success **so that** talented employees feel more committed to their work team as measured by their retention and by the employee engagement index.

Not all competency statements will lend themselves to this process, but the more competency statements that are operationalized, the more the model moves from qualitative to quantitative and ultimately is measurable.

Best Practice #4: Validate the Competency Model

Once the leadership competency model is finalized, assessment and development of the leadership team should commence. A customized 360 assessment is an excellent method of evaluating each leader's strengths and opportunities. The 360 assessment should be customized for the organization by using the competency statements as the foundation of the survey.

The competency model is then validated by assessing if the competency statements truly measure the competency and are able to predict success. This can be accomplished through analysis of the data results once the 360 has been administered. Success measures, such as operational performance metrics, are identified prior to the administration of the assessment and are used to validate whether or not the competency model can predict success of a leader within that specific organization.

Best Practice #5: Market the Leadership Brand

A significant benefit of a strategically aligned competency model is that it clearly defines the *Leadership Brand*. Leadership Brand is the combination of the firm's leaders mastering their competencies and senior leaders advertising these results to business publications, associations

and other public relations outlets to manage the firm's reputation. This means you are not only improving the quality of your existing leadership, but also sending a powerful message to prospective employees.

If you would like more information on how Wayne State University's Executive & Professional Development can help you implement your own competency model or any of the actions discussed in this article, please contact us at (313) 577-4449 or visit www.ExecEd.wayne.edu.