Activity 5
Competencies in context

Purpose

To enable participants to gain a general understanding of what competency statements mean by placing them in a work-based context.

Activity 5
Competencies in context

Introduction

Competencies are useful in a number of people areas such as recruitment, appraisal, promotion and reorganisation for new jobs, to name but a few. It is important that anyone who has an involvement in these areas gains an understanding of what competency statements mean in day-to-day work-based situations.

When using competency statements to compare, describe and rate the people who work in the organisation, we need to be sure that the behaviour criteria (competency statement) we use is meaningful to us, the person it describes, and to others with whom that person interacts. What do these words mean in a day-to-day working environment? What practical behaviours and attitudes do we think fit the statements? By putting the statements in context, we lift the words from the page and make them come to life, giving them meaning and understanding. This ensures that they become more effective and fully embedded in the practices and processes that the organisation adopts for managing its people.

Purpose

To enable participants to gain a general understanding of what competency statements mean by placing them in a work-based context.

Application

You can use this activity to help managers and staff place generic competency statements into context by describing individual behaviour criteria in terms of the behaviours and attitudes found in the workplace.

What happens

The activity opens with a group discussion on the need to interpret the generic nature of competency statements and turn them into something meaningful that relates practically to the everyday work situation.

Together, the participants look at what jobs are being considered and how competencies will be used with these jobs. Working in groups, they then take one of the competency statements and contextualise it around a job of their choice.

The groups present their findings – examples of behaviours and attitudes in the workplace associated with the competency statement they examined – in a group feedback session.

The activity closes with a review of the key learning points. The participants are encouraged to take ownership of the competency framework process and apply it in their own workplace to create a contextual framework.

Time

Overall time required: 2 hours 15 minutes

- Introduction: 5 minutes
- Putting competencies into context: 15 minutes
- Setting the components in context: 30 minutes
- Applying competency statements: 45 minutes
- Group feedback: 30 minutes
- Review: 10 minutes

Materials & resources

- 2 OHT masters:
  5.1 *Management and development of staff*
  5.2 *IT manager*

- 1 Handout master:
  0.1 *Competency framework skills components*

- Overhead projector and screen
- Flipchart and stand or whiteboard
- Marker pens for trainer
- Flipchart paper and marker pens for participants
- Paper and pens for participants
- Wall, screens or whiteboard for displaying flipchart pages
- Tape, Blu-Tack® or pins.
- Two prepared sheets of flipchart paper

In preparation

Make copies of *Handout 0.1 Competency framework skills components*, (pages xvi–xxiii) for the participants to use in the exercise Applying competency statements, on page 5–7.

Prepare two sheets of flipchart paper as shown below:

Jobs and competencies
What jobs are you considering?

-
-
-
-
-

How will you use competencies in relation to these?

-
-
-
-
-

Criteria in context
Delegates routine tasks to develop others:

-
-
-
-
-

Gives on-the-job training and transfers 'how-to' skills to others:

-
-
-
-

How do I do it?

INTRODUCTION

Begin by explaining to the participants that the aim of the activity is to describe individual behaviour criteria in terms of the day-to-day behaviours and attitudes found in the workplace.

It is helpful therefore, if they understand what they are going to use the competency statements for.

Explain that competency statements are generalisations about people behaviour and that they do not refer to specific jobs or levels (grades) of jobs within any given organisation. To be able to use competency statements effectively, their meaning needs to be placed in context; that is, the general behaviour described in each individual statement has to be re-described in real work-based terms that have meaning to the people doing the jobs.

PUTTING COMPETENCIES INTO CONTEXT

Take about 15 minutes to help participants get a feel for the general principle of competencies and to consider what they intend using competency statements for.

Ask the questions 'What jobs are you considering in terms of competency statements?' and 'How will you use these competency statements in relation to these jobs?'. Ask the participants to call out the jobs and their ideas about competencies. Write them on the prepared sheet of flipchart paper 'Jobs and competencies' (see In preparation). This will help the participants to focus on their work situation and the actual people who do the jobs. Encourage them to use proper names (Steve, Helen, and so on).

SETTING THE COMPONENTS IN CONTEXT

Show OHT 5.1
Management and development of staff

Select one of the suggested jobs from the 'Jobs and competencies' flipchart sheet, then show OHT 5.1 Management and development of staff, which contains the criteria associated with Positive behaviour 1. Read through the OHT with the participants and then, referring to the flipchart sheet 'Jobs and competencies', ask them to suggest behaviour that supports each of the criteria on the OHT. Ask specific questions such as:

- What do these job holders do?

- What is their behaviour?

- What specific actions do they take that make the participants feel that these people meet the criteria?

Collect real examples, using your own questions to gather further information, and try to get contributions from the participants. Record their responses on the prepared sheet of flipchart paper 'Criteria in context', beneath the two criteria:

- Delegates routine tasks to develop others
- Gives on-the-job training and transfers 'how-to' skills to others.

Explain to the participants that they have looked at two of the five criteria shown on the overhead as a practical exercise to demonstrate how to approach the task of setting skills components into context themselves.

Show OHT 5.2
IT manager

Reinforce this by showing OHT 5.2 IT manager, to further illustrate the behaviours that an IT manager might exhibit when developing the skills of their team. When reading this OHT with the participants, emphasise the behaviours Steve displays that illustrate the criteria.

At this point, you might feel that the participants would benefit from a review of what they have just done. You can do this as described in the Trainer's Tip below. You may need to allow a little time within the 30 minutes of the exercise to do this.

TRAINER'S TIP

If you feel the group needs more help, return to OHT 5.1 Management and development of staff.

Show OHT 5.1
Management and development of staff

Read through the OHT again and explain that it is a generic statement taken from the Management and development of staff skills component and shows the criteria associated with Positive behaviour 1. Explain (as an example) that if you were appraising an IT manager who is developing their team, then it should be possible to identify certain consistent behaviours.

Follow this by showing OHT 5.2 again.

Show OHT 5.2
IT manager

Explain that these are the behaviours you might find in this situation. Talk through this OHT until the participants have a clearer idea of what it means. Then return to Setting the components in context, on page 5–5 and work through the process described.

APPLYING COMPETENCY STATEMENTS

Now divide the participants into four groups of three or four and ask each group to choose from those they suggested on the prepared flipchart sheet 'Jobs and competencies'. It should be a job that they have some knowledge of. Give each group one of the four competency skills components – leadership, management and development of staff, communication, or teamwork/interpersonal – from Handout 0.1.

> **Distribute Handout 0.1**
> *Competency framework skills components*

Tell the groups to discuss their chosen job in terms of the competency component they have been given, and find practical examples of behaviours and attitudes associated with that job which relate to the competency criteria. These should demonstrate typically what each level in the statement would look like.

Advise the participants that they have 45 minutes for this task, and to spend perhaps 10–15 minutes reading through their competency statement, brainstorming ideas and making notes before they begin to associate behaviours with the skills levels.

Give each group a supply of flipchart paper and marker pens and ask them to record their findings.

GROUP FEEDBACK

At the end of the exercise ask each of the groups to give a short presentation of 3 or 4 minutes (through a spokesperson if they wish) from their flipchart sheet(s) on what they found, stating the job they are referring to and giving some practical examples of the competency statements in context. If you allow about 30 minutes in all, this will leave time for discussion and comments about the exercise after the presentations.

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Through the feedback you can check that the participants are receiving useful contributions from the exercise and understanding the process effectively.

REVIEW

Close the activity by reviewing the key learning points as shown below. Use the Trainer's tip below to explain how the participants can benefit from what they have just learned in their role as managers, enabling them to help their staff to be more effective in their jobs.

- Competencies are used for recruitment, appraisal, promotion and re-organisation for new jobs. Anyone who has an involvement in these areas should understand what competency statements mean in day-to-day work based situation.

- To be able to use competency statements effectively, their meaning needs to be placed in context.

- General behaviour described in each individual statement has to be re-described in real work-based terms.

TRAINER'S TIP

Groups or individuals now take ownership of the process. This is done outside the activity by recording the behaviours found for each component of the competency framework for any job using the process described above.

The results can be collected together and published internally to help all staff to understand how their performance is assessed and just what they need to do to be effective in the job.

The expected outcome of this activity is a contextual framework which is recognisable by the organisation; that is, the wording is no longer generic. The framework is generated by people working in the organisation, using their own jobs and their own language.

Management and development of staff

Positive behaviour 1

- **Delegates routine tasks to develop others.**

- **Gives in-the-job training and transfers 'how to' skills to others.**

- **Shares some knowledge with others to enable them to broaden their learning.**

- **Listens to the queries of others, then tells them how it should be done.**

- **Ensure staff receive formal training to address development needs.**

IT manager

- **Delegates routing tasks to develop others.**
  Steve have delegated the daily back-ups for three months now.

- **Gives on-the-job training and transfers 'how to' skills to others.**
  He trained two of his junior staff and this appears to work well.

- **Shares some knowledge with others to enable them to broaden their learning.**
  He ran through it with them every night for three nights until they said they were happy.

- **Listens to the queries of others, then tells them how it should be done.**
  When they had a problem last month, Steve sorted it, then instructed them how to do it from then on!

- **Ensures staff receive formal training to address development needs.**
  He has sent his supervisor on a trainer training course to help with the induction training in his section.