

Leadership Competencies: *Why They Are and What They're Not*

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In a recent webinar called *The Practice of Leadership Excellence*, I mentioned 10 “Macro” Competencies that we’ve observed to be evident in excellent leadership:

- Trustworthiness
- Forward-Orientation
- Courage
- Execution
- Wisdom
- Inspiration
- Management
- Developmental
- Resilience
- Continual Learning

We’ll break down these macro-competencies — *What They Are* — in future issues. But first, it’s important to understand *Why They Are*: Why these competencies play such an important role in leadership excellence.

Why Are These Competencies?

In their book *Strengths Based Leadership*, authors Tom Rath and Barry Conchie make a powerful observation: While most leadership research data focuses on *how people lead*, it’s also vital to look at *why people follow*. Based on a three-year Gallup study, they identify four qualities of life that leaders give to their followers:

1. Trust – People want someone they can believe
2. Compassion – People want to be cared for
3. Stability – People seek out stability
4. Hope – People thirst for hope

This list is a window into the needs of followers. People gravitate toward leaders whose behavior consistently provides these qualities of life. Leaders may leverage things like technical skills, experience or best practices, but ultimately there’s one reality that separates excellent leaders from mediocrity — they behave like excellent leaders.

What does that mean for you? Your followers use the content of your behavior to measure your competence as their leader.

What Competencies Are Not

Viewing your own leadership from the perspective of your followers requires raw objectivity. So raw, in fact, that many leaders avoid it because it's so threatening. To help gain this objectivity, it may be helpful to discuss what a leadership competency *is not*.

A competency is not a style. A style is an approach or a method, which may fluctuate over time or vary from one setting to another. Competencies are timeless and universal. Styles, in and of themselves, don't translate into competencies. Think of it this way: You could employ an authoritative leadership style, for example, without having courage or making wise decisions — both of which are leadership competencies.

A competency is not a personality trait. Let's use extraversion, as an example. It's common to view charisma as a leadership asset. Not to pick on the E's, but I've seen plenty of extraverted, energetic leaders struggle to execute because they couldn't create — and stick to — an effective strategy. Or they mistake people's energetic response as a commitment to follow their leadership, only to be painfully surprised when the "commitment" evaporates. Leveraging personality may look and feel like leadership on the surface, but it is not.

A competency is not a value. A value is a principle. Truth, for example, is a value. Love, community and benevolence are values. There's a tendency to look at leadership competencies and appreciate them as values (in fact, what we call *aspirational* values). But values are distinct from behavior. It is easy to appreciate resilience, for example, without actually demonstrating it. Values *drive* behavior — they are not the behavior itself.

A competency is not a goal or intention. Leadership performance is measured in terms of *actual* behavior, not *intended* or *potential* behavior. Stated frankly, it's not how you *mean* to behave, it's how you behave — period.

This is why we recommend a 360^o assessment for our clients. It is usually eye opening for a leader to see a composite picture of their behavior through the eyes of 6-8 trusted people who care about their development. It's not uncommon for that picture to look very different than the one in their mind prior to the assessment.

It may be uncomfortable to realize that your leadership behavior is not at the level of excellence you had intended. But avoiding the topic is doing yourself — and the people you lead — a serious disservice. Discovering the objective truth about your leadership behavior creates both the clarity and the incentive to develop and grow your leadership.

Unpacking leadership competencies is one part of an overall focus on leadership development that represents one of the greatest opportunities for strengthening and expansion of the church in our time. We believe in leadership development so strongly that we include it as one of the final steps in our strategic planning process: The church should always be developing more and better leaders.