USING COMPETENCIES TO IMPROVE SCHOOL TURNAROUND PRINCIPAL SUCCESS

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INTRODUCTION

In a time when student outcomes matter more than ever, many states, districts, and reformers are considering whether and how turnarounds of chronically failing schools can achieve superior results. In fact, we already know much about when and how successful turnarounds work, both from other sectors and from recent experience in education.

Two major factors affect turnaround success: the characteristics and actions of the turnaround leader, and the support for dramatic change that the leader and staff receive from the district, state, and/or other governing authority. Although leadership accounts for 25 percent of school effects in most schools,[1] in a turnaround the leader is paramount. It is almost unheard of for turnarounds to occur without a special breed of leader at the helm—one who engages and focuses the whole community on achieving dramatic improvement goals fast.[2]

This paper aims first to shed light on one element of leadership: the characteristics—or "competencies"—of turnaround leaders who succeed in driving rapid, dramatic change. Second, we recount the elements of support that districts must provide these leaders to enable and sustain a portfolio of successful school turnarounds. Fortunately, decades of experience in other sectors and in education systems of other nations reveal tools and techniques for understanding and using turnaround leader competencies, and for governing turnaround leaders successfully.

U.S. educators must act on this knowledge. Today, few districts have an explicit strategy to select and empower school turnaround leaders using the best available techniques. Few provide the autonomy, support, and accountability for rapid, dramatic change that will attract, keep, and enable turnarounds by capable leaders.

Here we explain what states, districts, and others with an interest in school turnarounds need to know. This paper:

- **Describes how using competencies that predict performance can improve turnaround principal selection, evaluation, and development;** and
- **Summarizes prior research about how districts can create the right environment to increase school turnaround leader success.**

In addition, the appendix provides details about options for building valid competency models.

TURNAROUND LEADER COMPETENCIES

Here we describe the role of leadership in organizational turnarounds and how using competencies can allow better selection, development, and support of those leaders.

Turnaround Leaders: A Special Breed of Leadership

Decades of research have documented that having the right leader is an essential component of successful turnarounds.[3] Despite the intense national focus on school turnarounds, significant barriers prevent reformers from finding and enabling leaders likely to succeed in a turnaround.

Why? *First, turnaround efforts are made when organizations are in a state of entrenched failure. Leaders who would otherwise succeed often fall short in a turnaround*. Turnaround success is a challenge even in sectors where this strategy has been tried often. Studies across sectors suggest that only 30 percent of turnaround efforts succeed.[4] Even leaders who have excelled in other circumstances may fail when faced with the rapid, dramatic change required in a turnaround effort. The current education leadership pool is unlikely to have the number and type of candidates needed to lead a large number of school turnaround efforts. Therefore, recruitment must focus on candidates whose capabilities fit the specific demands of turnarounds.

Second, typical school district practices are not designed to recruit and select talent for challenging schools, including the bold leaders needed for turnaround schools.[5] Most districts base principal and staff hiring on college degrees and years of experience. Numerous research studies over several decades have shown that degrees and experience (after the first few years of teaching) are poor predictors of performance.[6] As reformers focus on recruiting, they need new methods to choose the right people for turnarounds.

Third, few districts measure performance differences among leaders and staff that would be useful for identifying and developing internal candidates for school turnaround leadership.[7] Understanding the characteristics needed to succeed in a turnaround would allow internal selection and development of high-potential candidates from among current teachers and principals.

Understanding the Crucial Role of Competencies

Performance differences are large in difficult jobs: research has found that the top 1 percent of jobholders in complex jobs produce results 127 percent better than the average.[8] Many organizations select employees based on experience and degrees, hoping that these indicators will predict success on the job. Yet many of us have experienced the "experience and degrees" myth firsthand. When two seemingly similar candidates are hired—with the same level of education, experience, and technical skills—one sometimes turns out to be an outstanding performer, while the other struggles.

In the 1970s, a cognitive psychologist from Harvard University, David McClelland, tried to find out why. He hypothesized and ultimately demonstrated that habits of behavior and underlying motivations, which he called "competencies," differentiate workers' performance outcomes. As a result of his and others' subsequent research, employers can understand not just what employees do to be successful, but *how* they do it.[9] By examining candidates' competencies, employers can

By examining candidates' competencies — habits of behavior and underlying motivations — employers can understand how employees succeed.

uncover differences likely to affect performance, helping to choose between candidates who may otherwise seem identical.

Competency-based performance management remains relatively rare in education. But many organizations in other sectors (public, nonprofit, and private) use competencies for selection, development, and career planning—even pay.[10] Other nations, including Singapore and the United Kingdom, now use competencies throughout their education systems.[11] To learn how competency-based human capital systems work well, we therefore need to turn to other sectors and nations that have used them for many years.

For the past 10 years, competency-based evaluation has been the bedrock of Singapore's educational system, one of the strongest in the world.[12] In the early 2000s, Singapore implemented a competency-based performance management system for the three major roles in Singaporean schools—teachers, principals, and school specialists.[13] School officials use the competency model in conjunction with the achievement of positive student outcomes and other measurable results to set annual competency targets, evaluate competency levels throughout the year, match each educator to a career path, and determine annual bonuses. In the decade since introducing this system, Singapore has continued to raise student performance and narrow the achievement gaps among its ethnic groups.[14]

Research Base on Competencies

When Dr. McClelland began his research in the early 1970s, he was reacting to studies finding that standard ways of evaluating job candidates—IQ tests and other tests of academic aptitude, knowledge content tests, school grades, and academic credentials—did not fully predict job performance and were often biased against minorities, women, and people in poverty.[15] In the course of his research, he coined the term "competency" to describe the behavioral characteristics that he found could predict performance.

Although the term competency often describes any work-related skill, in this context competencies refers to the underlying motives and habits—patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking—that cause a person to be successful in a specific job or role.[16] McClelland compared the competency patterns of very high performers to those of typical performers. When analyzing these high performers, he found that underlying characteristics (e.g., persistence, achievement motivation, self-confidence) led to actions (e.g., calculated risk taking, goal setting, planning) that in turn led to better outcomes (e.g., effectiveness, productivity, innovation).[17] Research conducted in the decades since McClelland's original study has provided further evidence that underlying competencies enable successful performance in a given job or role.[18]

In the course of their research, McClelland and his colleagues also developed a methodology for identifying and validating the competencies for particular jobs and roles. This interview technique—known as a behavior event interview (BEI)—combined elements of an existing technique called the "critical incident method" with probes about motivation that McClelland's team refined over several decades.[19] Instead of asking people

Behavior event interviews probe for information about past events to predict future job performance.

to provide hypothetical responses to interview questions, BEIs ask them to walk interviewers through past incidents step by step, as though the interviewee is reliving the experience. This helps interviewees reveal what they were thinking, saying, and doing at the time, and makes it hard to claim credit for actions that the individual did not take.[20]

Studies since McClelland's original research indicate that structured interviews such as the BEI that probe for information about past events are highly correlated with later job performance.[21] For example, an independent, comparative study of behavior-based interviews and unstructured interviews at a large life insurance company found that the behavior-based interviews yielded a validity coefficient of .48 using supervisor ratings as the performance criterion, and .61 using sales dollars as the performance criterion. In contrast, the standard interview yielded a validity coefficient of .08 and .05, respectively.[22] McClelland's last published study found that 65 percent to 86 percent of managerial candidates who met a threshold level of competence when selected using a model constructed with BEIs ended up in the top third of performers, compared with 11 perent to 20 percent of candidates who scored lower in competence during the selection process.[23]

Imagine the consequence for children of selecting turnaround principals as accurately: candidates meeting threshold levels of competencies could be far more likely to succeed in turnaround attempts than candidates who fall short.

The "iceberg model" (Figure 1) was developed by the Hay Group, an international human resource firm where McClelland spent the latter part of his career, to demonstrate how competencies relate to observable qualifications, knowledge, and skills. As this model demonstrates, competencies are more difficult to detect than qualifications, skills, and knowledge, but they largely influence these observable behaviors.[24] Competency research further suggests that outstanding performance in complex jobs—ones in which most candidates have a similar educational history and significant autonomy over daily work tasks—is driven more by underlying competencies than by readily observed skills and knowledge. Individuals in these complex jobs, such as school principals, *use* their similar content knowledge very differently to accomplish work goals. For example, some proactively set difficult goals and stick to them, while others do only what is asked by superiors or give up when a goal proves difficult to achieve. Some try to do all the work themselves, while others identify colleagues' strengths and put them into roles where they will succeed. This wide variation in how people work produces greatly varying results unexplained by prior knowledge, degrees, and experience, making competency-based performance management practices especially critical.[25]

In the past 40 years, dozens of competencies have been identified as success distinguishers in different jobs and roles, in combinations that are unique to each particular role. Nevertheless, two competencies appear critical to high levels of success in most complex leadership jobs: "achievement" and "impact and influence."[26]

- **Achievement** is defined as "the drive and actions to set challenging goals and reach a high standard of performance." In a leader, achievement includes "setting high performance goals for the organization, prioritizing activities to achieve the highest benefit relative to inputs, and working to meet goals using direct action, staff, and other available resources."[27]
- **Impact and influence** is "acting with the purpose of affecting the perceptions, thinking and actions of others. It includes empathizing with others and

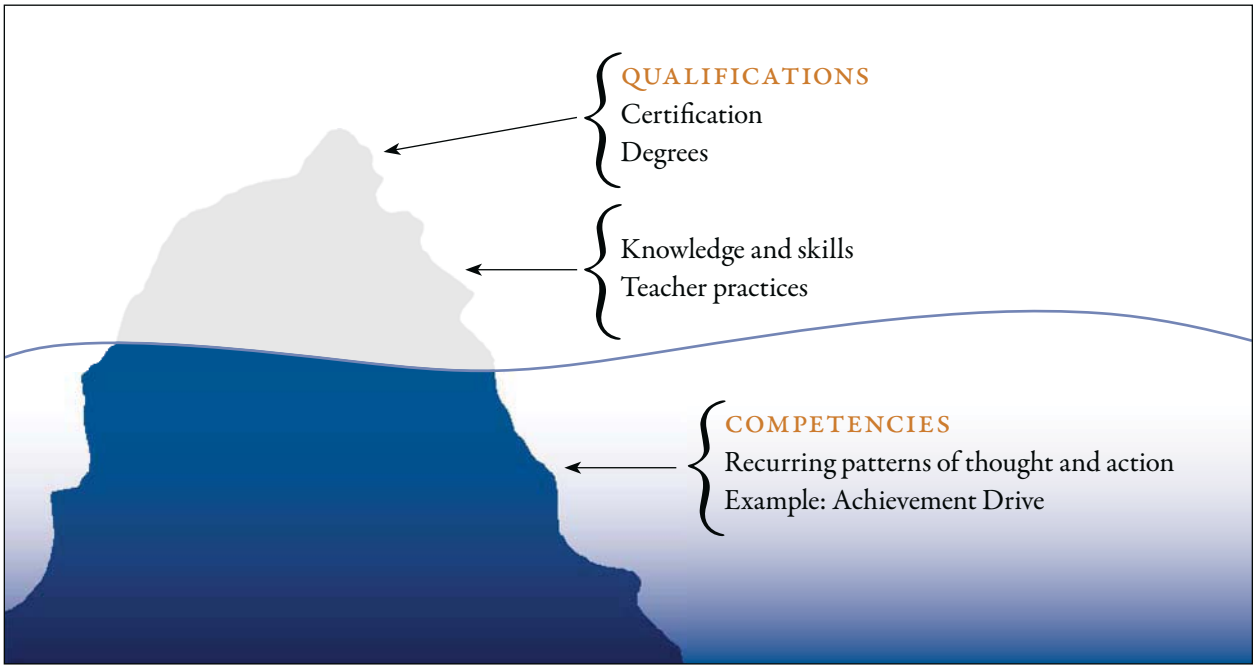

FIGURE 1: Observable characteristics versus underlying competencies (Adapted from "The Iceberg Model" in Spencer & Spencer, *Competence at Work*, p. 11.)

anticipating likely responses to situations, tailoring actions and words to create an intended impact, and giving and withholding information to obtain specific responses."[28]

Leaders in different situations—such as start-ups, large organizations, and turnaround efforts—might need to use these competencies in differing degrees and ways.[29] But a literature review of the actions that successful turnaround leaders take indicates that high levels of competence in both achievement and impact and influence are most likely essential for school turnaround principals.[30]

Identifying Distinguishing Competencies: Building a Valid Model

What makes competency-based performance management strategies powerful is the potential to correlate qualitative characteristics with performance outcomes in a statistically valid manner. A good competency model includes descriptions of both the competencies that are needed to succeed in a job and the increasing levels of performance within each competency. Most important, in a valid model, the competencies and increasing levels correlate with performance outcomes, such as student learning gains.

Organizations should use competency models built using an approach that is as valid and predictive of performance as circumstances allow.[31]

- *Building a competency model from scratch*. A model can be built from scratch when there is an accessible, large set of jobholders who have been on the job for several years and who can be classified as outstanding and average.
- *Building a model from related, validated models—the stepladder approach.* Emerging roles, jobs in emerging sectors, and jobs spread out among many smaller organizations may not have enough accessible performers for a data set of outstanding and typical performers whom researchers can compare. In these cases, a model can be extrapolated by mapping the actions needed for success in the job to similar jobs for which validated competency models *are* available.

In either case, a model can be validated and refined over time by comparing competency ratings during selection to later performance outcomes. Subsequent hiring can emphasize competencies that most accurately sort high and typical performers. Appendix A provides more detail about the various options for building and validating competency models.

Using Competencies to Ensure Effective School Turnaround Leadership

Organizations can use competencies for many purposes. Here we briefly describe three important uses for school turnarounds: 1) hiring effective turnaround principals; 2) evaluating principal performance; and 3) providing targeted development for school turnaround principals. Using performance-predictive competencies at each of these critical stages of an employee's career increases the likelihood of improving employee performance in key results areas.

Hiring effective school turnaround principals

Selecting people who already have most of the competencies needed for turnaround leadership, rather than relying on long-term development, may be the best way to achieve the rapid results a turnaround demands.[32]

A competency model that will be used for selection should include competency descriptions, levels, and tools for rating and comparing candidates. For example, some states and the UVA School Turnaround Specialist Program use Public Impact's competency model for selecting school turnaround principals.[33] It includes: 1) short, broad definitions of the competencies that distinguish high performance; 2) rating scales of increasingly effective levels of behavior within each competency; 3) competency level targets for the job of school turnaround principal; and 4) selection steps and guidelines for assessing candidates' competency levels using the behavior event interview (BEI).[34] Appendix B provides more detail about how hirers can use the BEI to assess candidate's competencies.

Evaluating school turnaround principals

Considerable evidence indicates that current principal evaluation practices are similar in quality to the ineffec-

Principal evaluation too often consists of a binary rating sheet that asks the evaluator to check off "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory."

tual teacher evaluation practices that have been widely criticized.[35] According to researchers, principal evaluation too often consists of a binary rating sheet that asks the evaluator to check off "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" on a number of items such as "time management" or "demonstrates effective organizational skills."[36] This kind of evaluation fails to deliver the information that districts need to evaluate principals' performance accurately and that principals need to improve.

Including *measurable results* in principal evaluation could correct this situation. The arguments for and against this shift are beyond the scope of this report, but basing at least part of any evaluation on student outcomes would be consistent with the best practices of many high-performing organizations in both the public and private sectors.[37]

Evaluations rarely hinge solely on results, though. Outcomes alone do not give employers information to help with promotion and job placement decisions, nor do they give employees information about how to improve.[38] A complete evaluation system includes not only measurable results, but also professional skills, such as curriculum planning, and of course the competencies

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that are critical for achieving results. Understanding the competencies a principal demonstrates during a school turnaround effort and rating the principal's performance against these competencies in an evaluation can help employers understand why a leader is succeeding or falling short—and whether ultimate success is likely. When the competency gaps are large and early indicators of progress are poor, a leader may need to be replaced rather than developed.[39]

Developing school turnaround principals

Waiting to develop a leader on the job means a sure recipe for failure when fast results are essential. But even very competent turnaround principals will have areas of competency weakness, and they also will need to develop turnaround competencies among the staff leaders on their teams. Fortunately, some research in-

dicates that leaders can continue improving individual competencies with the right training, when it is clearly linked to outcome goals.[40]

Indeed, early turnaround results can provide the essential motivation principals and staff leaders need to improve.[41] In a school turnaround, leaders must rapidly identify failing approaches and try new tactics.[42] Those who understand their own challenges are in a better position to make these changes fast.

The superintendent (or other direct supervisor) and the principal can identify the principal's competency levels—for example, with ratings based on a combination of supervisor, staff, parent, and student input—and compare these to levels needed for superior performance. The principal can then focus on closing his gaps and using his strengths more often. A valid model with progressively more effective levels of competence aids development by giving school leaders specific next-step actions needed for better student outcomes.[43]

For example, a principal might have a current rating of "4" on the impact and influence competency, which indicates that she regularly "thinks ahead about the likely reaction of the audience and takes two or more steps that are calculated to obtain desired impact." In order to improve, she and her supervisor might set a goal for her to move to level 5 by more effectively and consistently "using others (e.g., parents, staff members) to obtain desired impact."[44] Appendix C provides more details about how principals can continue improving their individual competencies with the right training.

But even the best leader's efforts can be thwarted by an environment unsupportive of change. So next we summarize the elements of a district environment in which turnarounds are most likely to occur—and succeed.

CREATING AN EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT THAT SUPPORTS TURNAROUNDS

The research on turnarounds in education and other sectors suggests that multiple environmental factors influence an organization's ability to improve rapidly and that even the best leader's efforts can be frustrated and diminished by an unsupportive environment. Districts that want to increase the odds of successful school turnarounds should take an active leadership and support role. The following steps for districts are drawn from a research brief written by Public Impact that applies cross-sector and education research to the district role in turnarounds:[45]

Districts that want to increase the odds of successful school turnarounds should take an active leadership and support role.

- **Commit to success.** Policymakers overseeing the turnaround effort—state department officials, district leaders, school board members—must prioritize student learning needs over the customs, routines, and established relationships that can stand in the way of necessary change. They must view turnarounds not as a one-time solution but as part of a sustained effort to eliminate chronic low performance, and must be willing to stay the course even when some first attempts fail. Policymakers need to assess their own capacity to oversee and support dramatic and sometimes disruptive change before committing to this strategy.
- **Choose the right schools.** Turnarounds are a necessary step in schools where student performance is extremely and chronically low and where incremental efforts to improve student outcomes have failed.
- **Give leaders the "big yes."** Successful turnaround leaders often achieve results by working around rules, asking for forgiveness after their strategy has worked rather than seeking permission beforehand.[46] By giving turnaround leaders the "big yes" on critical autonomies—staffing decisions, scheduling, budgeting, and other operational issues—policymakers can help support successful turnarounds.

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Publicizing early "wins" can also send a powerful message that change is possible and turnarounds can work.

- **Proactively engage the community.** Dramatic change requires active communication with local stakeholders. Successful efforts to engage the community are characterized by public acknowledgement of past failures coupled with a forceful, positive vision for the future.[47] Publicizing early "wins" can also send a powerful message that change is possible and turnarounds can work.[48]
- **Hold leaders accountable for results.** Policymakers must hold turnaround leaders to high standards and a short timeline for results. The research literature does not indicate an exact timeline required to turn an organization around, but in successful turnaround efforts, fast, focused changes occur in the first few months, and substantial improvements in the first year.[49]
- **Develop a talent pipeline.** District leaders need to build their supply of turnaround leaders and teachers through proactive recruitment, careful selection, targeted training, and strategic placement in turnaround schools. The skills and abilities of principals and teachers who succeed in turnarounds differ from those of their peers who succeed in less-challenging schools. Competency screening should be a critical step in the hiring process.

A CALL TO ACTION

The U.S. desperately needs a strong cadre of school leaders who can turn around persistently low-performing schools. But today, this cadre is far too small. States and districts that are serious about eliminating broad-scale failure in schools must use the very best tools available to select, evaluate, and develop these school turnaround leaders. Current practices—inconsistent hiring, uneven support, and weak evaluation—are severely inadequate. Competency-based people-management, coupled with the right district environment, can significantly increase the number and performance of school turnaround leaders. What steps would make this urgent priority a reality?

Disseminate information about competency-based practices to key stakeholders in education. Too few education leaders and policymakers know about competency-based selection, evaluation, and development—strategies commonly used in other sectors. Even fewer know that districts can validate and improve competency models by comparing competency ratings with performance outcomes. Similarly few realize how different the competencies needed for the role of turnaround leader are from those needed in traditional principal jobs. Audiences that would benefit from better awareness include district leaders, state policymakers, philanthropists, parent and community advocacy organizations, and national and local school leadership training programs.

Invest in competency models for critical school leadership (and teaching) roles. The best competency models are based on data from behavioral event interviews and correlate with performance outcomes. States and districts in the U.S. have not invested in this type of rigorous model building, because of the investment involved and low awareness of the value. If the United States is going to dramatically improve teacher and leader performance, then some combination of districts, states, the federal government, and private foundations must invest in the research, development, and improvement of competency models for critical roles in education. As the pool of serious school turnaround attempts grows, validation and improvement of competency models for leaders and teachers in this context will be possible.

Select school turnaround leaders for competence. Our nation must identify far more leaders to turn around persistently failing schools. Competency-based selection for critical leadership (and other important) positions would enable selection from a much wider labor pool—turnaround leaders from other sectors and emerging teacher-leaders, for example. Other sectors and nations have used this approach widely, yet it remains rare in U.S. education.

Develop strong competency-based training programs for school turnaround principals. A critical application of competency models is development. Education leaders should add and expand training programs for school turnaround principals that incorporate competency-based practices, such as the University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program.

Evaluate and publicize results. As schools, districts, and states undertake more school turnarounds, they must collect data to compare successful and less-successful leaders in these unique settings, and publicize this information widely. These analyses can validate individual competencies—and perhaps identify new ones as more data emerge—as well as provide rich examples of competencies in action.

APPENDIX A

Identifying Distinguishing Competencies

Building a Valid Model

Two aspects of building a competency model are critical to validity, regardless of approach. The first is to use a sample of employees that compares truly outstanding performers with people who are average performers in their jobs. The second is to collect data about competencies that give more weight to behaviors that jobholders have *actually displayed* on the job than to what they or others think they should do.[50]

In the following section, we describe two approaches to building a valid competency model, noting areas where model-builders have a choice of methods.

Building a competency model from scratch

This section describes the most customized way to build a valid competency model.[51] Using this method, however, requires a large data set of jobholders who have been on the job for several years and who can clearly be classified as outstanding or average. While this might be possible someday for turnaround leaders, the techniques described in the next section for building—and then validating—models with limited data sets are more appropriate today.

We are not aware of any public education organization in the United States that has built a competency model from scratch using the rigorous method described here—for any job, including jobs that, unlike turnaround leader, are already very prevalent. Because several of the steps described below are costly and require expertise, building a model that meets this high standard of rigor and effectiveness represents a considerable investment of resources. In positions with numerous jobholders, such as traditional principal and teaching roles, the cost per job of this method would be small. Leaders of states and large districts, take note: one large investment could provide valid, performance-predictive tools to nearly every school in a district or state—or nationwide.

From-scratch: Building a model with behavior event interviews:[52]

- **Determine performance criteria.** First, determine what constitutes outstanding performance. Do this in consultation with a range of people who understand the role, and, ideally, include data both quantitative (e.g., the magnitude and speed of student learning gains) and qualitative (e.g., parent and staff ratings).
- **Select criterion sample.** Researchers should then select two groups of current jobholders, one that has displayed average performance according to the performance criteria, and another that has displayed truly outstanding performance on the same set of measures. The samples need to be large enough to allow for statistical analysis.
- **Collect data.** The most effective method for collecting data is the structured interview technique mentioned earlier—the behavior event interview (BEI).[53] Unlike other interview techniques that ask candidates to respond to hypothetical situations, the BEI elicits detailed stories of past events that reveal how top performers differ from more typical or lower-performing jobholders. During this stage of the model-building process, avoid bias by ensuring that neither the interviewee nor the interviewer knows if they are in the "outstanding" or "average" sample. Because the BEI is also a highly effective method to use for actual candidate selection after the model has been validated, it is described in detail in the section below on selection.
- **Develop model.** Analyzing interview transcripts to determine the differences between average and outstanding performers is the most complex stage of the process, one that requires qualitative review and coding as well as statistical analysis. The goal is to determine what outstanding performers

do (e.g., actions, thoughts, feelings) that average performers do not do, and vice versa. Researchers then convert these findings into interval scales that identify a "threshold" level that describes the minimum requirements for average performance in each competency, as well as descriptions of levels of increasingly effective behaviors associated with this competency.[54]

For example, the competency called "Initiative and Persistence" may be a critical competency for turnaround leaders. It involves having the "drive and actions to do more than is expected or required in order to accomplish a challenging task." As the scale increases, so does the complexity of actions associated with this competency, from "voluntarily initiates and follows through on new work project that is not assigned by others" to "acts without formal or explicit authority, takes personal or career risks and bends organization norms or rules to accomplish a work objective."[55]

After the descriptors are written, they are then tested for inter-rater reliability and refined as needed. The final competency list, competency descriptions, descriptions of different levels of performance within a competency, and information about coding are included in a document that becomes the "competency model" for a particular job.

- **Validate model**. While validation is ideal, many organizations building models from scratch rely on the rigor of the initial process to produce a valid model. When time and funds allow, several methods can validate a competency model. Choosing a second sample of top and typical performers, conducting BEIs, and analyzing correlation of their competencies with actual performance outcomes is one method. Another rigorous method is to assess incoming candidates using data from BEIs, then analyze whether those who scored higher in the selection process perform better in their jobs according to the performance criteria.[56] Because the competency model is designed to predict actual performance on the job, testing the model against performance results is the most powerful way to validate the model. The other advantage of this method is it allows the model designers to revise and refine based on actual performance.[57]

Stepladder approach: Building a model from related, validated models

Two barriers can prevent building models from scratch: cost and limited past data about high performers. First, in many cases like school turnaround leaders, limited data are available to build a competency model from scratch. Emerging roles, jobs in emerging sectors, and jobs spread out among many smaller organizations may not have enough accessible performers for a data set of outstanding and typical performers whom researchers can compare. Second, models are expensive to build from scratch, particularly when jobholders are spread out geographically. What follows is a description of how to achieve a valid competency model at a lower cost and with limited data and access to jobholders.

- **Determine performance criteria**. This step is critical and should be implemented as described above.
- **Select criterion sample**. In selecting the two groups for analysis, model builders have some leeway with regard to sample sizes. The question to ask is, what is the minimum sample size needed to produce a valid result? Expert opinion suggests that it is better to include a larger sample of star performers, if possible, because they are the best source for detailed information about outstanding performers.[58] Sometimes, for example in an entirely new role, model builders will need to envision expected actions of performers likely to achieve outstanding results. In this case, focus groups may still be useful, but extrapolation from existing, valid models of related jobs will be essential.
- **Collect data**. In addition to BEIs (referenced above), there are other data collection techniques:
  - —**Focus groups**. This involves asking groups made up of people who know the job well to identify the competencies that are critical in a given job or role. Experience indicates that about half the competencies identified by focus groups are validated by a full competency study using BEIs.[59]

—**360-degree surveys**. Surveys ask superiors, peers, subordinates, and external people who interact with jobholders to rate whether particular competencies are important for superior performance, how often they are needed, and whether failure is likely if someone does not have this competency. Surveys are useful because they are quick and cost-effective to administer, and they can provide enough data for valid statistical analysis. However, survey designers may miss critical competencies in creating the survey.

—**Extrapolate from existing models of similar jobs.** Sometimes, top and typical performers are not accessible or available in numbers large enough to use the from-scratch method. This is especially likely in new roles and in organizations undergoing significant change. In these situations, model builders can look at validated competencies that distinguish performers in other roles and use these to identify actions needed for job success. School turnaround leaders are one example: until an identifiable, accessible population of performers who can clearly be labeled superior or typical is available for study, extrapolated models will have to suffice.[60] This approach is a relatively quick way to build a model, but still requires deep understanding of the job, the related jobs for which validated competency models have already been built, and the available competency models or dictionaries. However, without access to detailed information about superior and average performers in this exact role, the model may be less valid initially than a from-scratch model would be, if it were feasible. Validation is especially important for models built from related job models.

- **Develop model.** Experts analyze the data from focus groups, surveys, and existing competency models or dictionaries to choose the competencies likely to distinguish top performers and to identify the "threshold" levels of behavior for solid and outstanding performance. This stage requires expertise: thorough understanding of the jobs, thoughtful analysis of the data, and, when surveys are used, the ability to conduct statistical analysis. However, model builders do not identify new competencies as they would when analyzing BEIs. The final outcome—a competency model—is similar but less customized than a from-scratch model.
- **Validate model**. Models built this way can be refined over time, with use and deliberate validation analyses. There are several options for validating the competency model beyond comparing BEI results with actual job performance. For example, designers can conduct BEIs on incoming jobholders. Once enough have been interviewed for statistical validity and enough time has passed to observe their performance, experts can determine the extent to which each competency in the model accurately distinguishes outstanding and average performers. Conducting BEIs for validation requires the same expertise as BEIs for model building and thus is relatively costly.

  Another less-expensive approach when large numbers of jobholders are available is to design questionnaires that ask them—both outstanding and average performers—to respond to questions based on the model (e.g., how often in the past two months have you taken on a voluntary task at work?).[61] If the model was well-designed, then outstanding and average performers may be accurately identified by their responses and the competency model validated. 360-degree assessments by peers, subordinates, and supervisors can be used similarly to validate.

Hiring Effective School Turnaround Principals

Hiring people who already have most of the competencies needed for turnaround leadership, rather than relying on long-term development, may be the best way to achieve the rapid results a turnaround demands.[62]

After prescreening for other requirements, hirers can assess candidate competencies using these steps:[63]

- **Step 1: Conduct behavior event interview.** In a BEI, the interviewer's goal is to understand in detail how candidates perform various aspects of their work. To do this, the interviewer asks candidates to recall past events when they have felt successful or have dealt with specific situations at work (e.g., a time when he or she influenced another person, or led a team of people to accomplish work that was satisfying). The candidate should spend 15 minutes or more describing the incident in great detail, with the interviewer probing insistently for the information needed to understand exactly what a person was thinking or doing at the time. According to Hay Group researchers, sample probes include: "What led up to the situation? Who was involved? What did you think about, feel, want to have happen in the situation? What did you do? What was the outcome?"[64]

  The interviewer should: 1) probe insistently for detail; 2) keep the candidate focused on past events rather than reflecting on hypothetical situations or using generalities; and 3) take comprehensive notes or record what candidates say so that their responses can be used later for scoring.
- **Step 2: Rate candidate's competency levels**. The interview team then closely reviews the candidate's responses and notes any examples of "codable data," or data that is valid for scoring against the competency model. To be codable, responses must be in the first person ("I did this" rather than "we did it"), be about real rather than hypothetical actions and feelings, be volunteered by the candidate independently, and be about past rather than present feelings or behavior. After noting the codable comments, the interview team compares them against the competency level descriptions and rates the candidate on each competency.
- **Step 3: Make hiring decisions**. After each candidate has been rated on the competencies, hirers compare the strengths (and weaknesses) of the candidates who meet all or most competency thresholds to determine whom to hire. The number of slots available compared with the number of qualified candidates—and the level of challenge in each school—might affect how many are hired and for which schools.
- **Step 4: Collect performance data and revise interview.** After an initial round of hires, hirers can compare competency scores at selection with actual performance. Future hiring can focus on the competencies that best predict performance.[65]

In addition, most selected candidates will find feedback about their competency scores helpful both for using strengths with confidence and for choosing staff and assigning roles that balance each leader's weaknesses.

Developing School Turnaround Principals

Even very competent turnaround principals will have areas of competency weakness, and they also will need to develop turnaround competencies among the staff leaders on their teams. Fortunately, some research indicates that leaders can continue improving individual competencies with the right training, when it is clearly linked to outcomes goals.[66]

Options to help school turnaround principals develop specific competencies include:

- **Competency training**. Competency training appears to be most effective when trainers: 1) present compelling evidence that competency improvement will make employees better at their jobs; 2) give feedback to employees on how their own levels of competence compare with outstanding performers; 3) give employees opportunities to practice competency behaviors; and 4) expect employees to set competency development goals with action plans.[67]
- **Self-development resource guides**. Resource guides instruct principals about how to develop role-specific competencies. They can include written cases or video clips highlighting examples of competency behaviors at different levels, suggestions about practice activities, and instructions on how to access training and mentoring opportunities to improve specific competencies.[68]
- **"Stretch" roles or assignments**. Aiming some activities toward improving weaknesses can hasten development. For example, a principal who lacks self-confidence might establish a goal to give several presentations at community meetings where he practices "openly stating his own expertise or comparing himself positively with others."[69]
- **Mentoring**. A mentor who is very strong in a principal's areas of weakness can provide rapid feedback and guidance about improvement. Districts should assign mentors with the explicit expectation that the mentor will coach the principal in specified areas needing development. Research suggests that development cannot be imposed on another person.[70]

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