Reform Support Network

Great State Leaders

A Competency Framework for Growing Talent in a State Education Agency

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Purpose

Reforms of the scope and scale of those being undertaken by States today require the development of strong leaders at all levels of organizations to manage the change required by these and other initiatives. However, many State Education Agencies (SEAs) do not routinely assess or build the skills and abilities of their employees to design and plan far-reaching change, lead and/or manage the implementation of these reforms, shift associated policies and raise expectations. Talent is managed mostly through recruitment, if it is managed at all, and there are few resources in place to help existing SEA staff to grow and develop into strong leaders.

SEAs have little experience systemically addressing the leadership skills of their staff, identifying weak spots and supporting employees to improve in targeted ways. This competency framework is a first step in changing the conversation about talent in SEAs.

As Race to the Top grantees confronted the challenge of sustaining the reforms that have had the greatest impact on student achievement, they recognized even more the need to build capacity within their agencies. In fact, the Reform Support Network's (RSN) Sustainability Work Group identified capacity building as a significant area of challenge for their agencies and a potential roadblock to sustainability (see the Sustainability Rubric here). To address this gap in capacity building work, the RSN developed this competency framework to articulate the competencies and behaviors demonstrated by particularly effective (that is, role model) SEA leaders. These competencies were identified in collaboration with staff from numerous SEAs within the RSN Sustainability Work Group.

Potential Uses

This competency framework is one tool for SEA leaders to reflect on staff capacity and identify areas where the SEA can be strengthened. The framework is designed to be used by SEA leaders (for example, Chiefs, Chiefs of Staff, Deputy Commissioners, Associate Commissioners) and staff.

Question	Exercise
• Are there certain competencies that are common strengths or common areas of challenge for most staff across the agency?	Members of the SEA's leadership team assess the agency as a whole and identify areas of strength and challenge.
• Are there certain competencies that we can support specific teams or staff members to strengthen?	Leaders of specific teams or divisions within the agency ask their team members to self-assess their individual teams.
• Should we provide general or targeted professional development to address the needs identified using the rubric?	Team leader compares the results of individual team assessments to the overall results for the agency as a whole.
• Should we consider the competency needs of our organization or of specific positions when hiring new staff?	Talent manager uses the results of self-assessments to identify capacity gaps and prioritize applications from individuals with strengths in those areas.

The results of these exercises can be used to address capacity gaps within the agency. This may include creating professional development plans for certain teams or individuals, identifying opportunities for cross-team learning, creating mentoring opportunities or selecting prioritized criteria for future hires.

Organization

This framework is composed of seven competencies organized in three broad categories: leading change, leading self and leading others. Questions to consider outline the specific behaviors associated with each competency and are accompanied by descriptions of "beginning" to "role model."

Competency Framework: Categories and Competencies

LEADS CHANGE	LEADS SELF	LEADS OTHERS
A. Understands the work	A. Delivers results	A. Influences others
B. Thinks strategically	B. Learns continuously	B. Develops others
C. Communicates effectively		

"**Leading change**" means inspiring and requires deep understanding of the task at hand, making strategic connections and decisions and clear communication. This is arguably the most essential element that sets effective leaders apart from competent employees. Agencies with these leaders can manage the challenges of significant change efficiently with minimal disruption to their work.
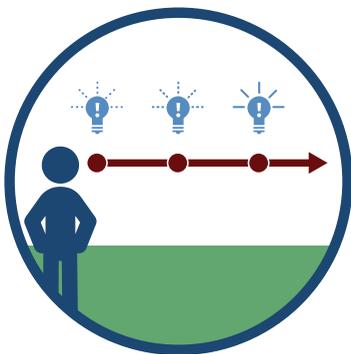
"**Leading self**" means consistently delivering results and working at continuous improvement. A person who "leads self" prioritizes based on the agency's priorities and achieves key objectives. In an agency with strong "self-leaders," everyone can be relied on to play their part in driving toward improved student outcomes.

"**Leading others**" means inspiring the team without relying solely on authority to get things done and continuously developing others by creating opportunities for learning, practice and feedback. Agencies with leaders like this are confident that improvement and growth is an ongoing process within agencies so that new leaders are constantly emerging.

It is the ability to integrate all of these skills and abilities across all three of these categories that leads to the success of an employee and an organization.

Competency Framework

The framework uses a four-point scale where 1 (Beginning) is the lowest rating and 4 (Role Model) is the highest rating. The categories represent progressively more advanced levels of capacity. The categories are defined in the following ways:

1. **Beginning**: Individuals who have shown little to no evidence of skills in this competency area.

2. **Developing**: Individuals who demonstrate emerging skills in this competency area, though not in a consistent manner that indicates mastery.

3. **Strong**: Individuals who represent full mastery of the requisite skills in each competency area.

4. **Role Model**: Individual who is an exemplar for others in this competency area and should be considered for a position with greater leadership responsibility.

Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
LEADS CHANGE				
A. Understands the work				
Does the individual:				
• Understand the details of the SEA's priority reforms?	• Operates with limited awareness of the agency's priorities, focusing narrowly on individual tasks without considering whether they align with the SEA's strategic directions	• Shows awareness of priority reforms and their relationship to one another and the State's overarching goals, but does not consistently make decisions with them in mind	• Demonstrates knowledge of relevant laws and policies surrounding the State's priority reforms and usually uses it to make decisions	• Deeply commits to the State's priority reforms by continuously building expertise in the relevant laws and policies, the connections between them and their implications for implementation; uses this knowledge to anticipate and overcome implementation challenges
• Understand and engage with the educational reform context?	• Treats the agency's priority reforms as State-specific and doesn't leverage national and/or peer expertise	• Focuses on the State's reform efforts with limited interest in the national context and opportunities for collaboration	• Uses knowledge of the national reform landscape to identify and draw on experts and resources to support in-State priority reforms	• Understands how all of the State's priority reforms are similar to and different from those in other States and from the national dialogue on reform; draws appropriately on expertise and resources from other States and nationally to support in-State priority reforms
• Build the necessary technical skills?	• Doesn't seek opportunities to grow technical skills of self and team	• Shows awareness of necessary technical skills, but does not proactively seek opportunities for professional development of themselves or members of his/her team	• Ensures his/her team has the necessary technical expertise by periodically seeking growth opportunities when needs arise	• Understands what specific technical skills are necessary to play his/her assigned role and does what it takes to develop or procure these skills on his/her team (for example, designing and delivering high-quality professional development; being able to apply a particular observation framework; navigating the State's procurement and contract management laws and practice)

LEADS CHANGE (continued)

B. Thinks strategically

Does the individual:

| Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
• Set strategic direction?	• Narrowly focuses on day-to-day tasks, prioritizing urgent deliverables without considering their impact on long-term goals; does not set a vision	• Occasionally communicates a broad vision for the work, but inconsistently grounds the team's efforts in where it fits into the agency's priorities and his/her individual work	• Keeps the "long view" front and center in planning and implementation efforts, but occasionally lets urgent "fires" derail focus on broader strategic priorities	• Creates a clear and compelling vision of what he/she is trying to accomplish and how it connects to the SEA's priority goals and reforms; able to express the moral imperative for the work and the SEA's priorities; breaks down this vision into manageable and coherent pieces that can be planned and implemented
• Bring logical and analytical rigor to decision making?	• Makes decisions in a vacuum, basing them more often on hunches rather than evidence and without consideration of potential implications	• Attempts to apply rigor to decisions, but sometimes struggles to identify root causes of the problem and test various hypotheses	• Applies logic and analytic rigor to most decisions, but when pressed for time, lets the need for an urgent decision compromise rigor	• Takes complex and ambiguous challenges and breaks them into manageable, concrete and coherent problems; generates hypotheses about the nature of each problem and conducts the necessary quantitative and/or qualitative analyses to test them rigorously, using the best evidence obtainable in the timeframe
• Synthesize information to solve problems?	• Relies on too narrow an evidence base, often resulting in flawed conclusions about how to solve the problem at hand	• Considers all available evidence when trying to solve problems or make decisions, but frequently does not distill the information into coherent recommendations	• Demonstrates skill and ability to synthesize complex information and make cogent recommendations, but applies these skills inconsistently, occasionally at the expense of fully informed decisions	• Quickly assimilates complex information from a variety of sources (for example, plans for the SEA's priority reforms, interactions with colleagues and partners, quantitative and qualitative evidence of progress, contextual clues from the external environment); sees connections between different types of evidence and distills them to identify core issues and best solutions for addressing big challenges; where appropriate, ventures beyond known facts to craft and test innovative solutions

LEADS CHANGE (continued)

C. Communicates effectively

Does the individual:

Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
• Produce clear, well-structured communications?	• Provides messages that are disjointed, one-sided, have too much/too little detail, are confusing and are error-filled; often appears unprepared and fails to connect with audiences when delivering oral presentations	• Provides messages that are of uneven clarity; gets the main points across, but often not in the most organized fashion; makes oral presentations that are generic, without thought to main takeaways for each specific audience	• Applies principles of well-structured communication (clear thesis supported by relevant evidence) to most, but not all, messages; delivers generally effective written and oral communication, but final products could be more elegantly presented and better crafted to maximize impact	• Communicates clearly, with a main point backed by supporting points and compelling evidence; ensures a tight logical relationship between a point being made, any supporting points and supporting evidence; crafts high-quality written communications that reflect attention to detail; delivers engaging oral presentations that achieve the desired impact on audiences
• Communicate through well-timed, well-placed and audience appropriate mechanisms?	• Communicates rarely or at the wrong time—does not choose an appropriate style or medium for the audience	• Pays attention to needs of audience, but often lets own preferences drive style medium and timing	• Usually chooses style, timing and media to increase impact on audience	• Plans use of style, timing and media strategically so that the combined impact of communications on the target audiences is maximized
• Engage and influence stakeholders on his/her own?	• Does not engage stakeholders or has poor relationships with key stakeholders	• Engages stakeholders with inconsistent strength and proactivity and is not driven by strategic priorities; does not establish credibility	• Usually has generally good relationships with stakeholders, but has not sufficiently prioritized and developed key relationships	• Demonstrates trustworthiness and judgment to lead high-stakes interactions with external partners or leaders in the field independently; displays sensitivity to the context and needs of each stakeholder; generates constructive dialogue by balancing a clear point of view with listening, empathy and responsiveness to stakeholders; calls upon a number of tactics to influence people, including credibility, logic and emotion
• Practice active listening?	• Often appears distracted and occasionally interrupts or corrects the speaker; struggles to effectively synthesize a speaker's main points and steer the conversation in an appropriate direction	• Listens with full attention to the speakers and hears people out patiently and without interruption; takes advantage of opportunities to practice active listening using techniques such as paraphrasing and synthesis	• Practices active listening; effectively synthesizes and restates others' comments; hears people out and seeks to understand before forming and articulating own opinion and response; validates others' perspective even when they disagree	• Practices active listening by paraphrasing speaker to ensure understanding; makes solid eye-contact and exhibits positive non-verbal listening language; synthesizes information accurately and in a way that moves the conversation forward; has the patience to hear people out, even—and especially—when they disagree

Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
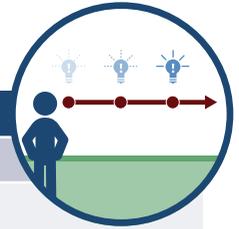
LEADS SELF

A. Delivers results

Does the individual:

Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
• Identify which pieces of his/her work are top priorities and focus the majority of his/her time on those?	• Allows urgency to drive distribution of limited time and resources	• Often lets crises divert focus on priorities	• Generally focuses time and resources on priorities, but sometimes allows distractions to interfere	• Prioritizes time and resources by asking what will be most likely to contribute to improvements in student outcomes
• Take ownership of the work?	• Views own efforts as disconnected from agency's priorities and blames others or the system for failure	• Assumes some responsibility for the work but lacks urgency around agency goals	• Takes responsibility for achieving agency goals, though may not be primary focus	• Takes responsibility for achieving clear objectives that contribute substantially to priority reforms and pursues them with proactivity and persistence
• Manage and produce to deadlines and goals?	• Sacrifices quality to meet deadlines; requires close supervision to adhere to established timelines and budgets	• Lacks sufficient project management skills to stay on top of work; produces work of varying quality or frequently misses deadlines	• Has strong project management skills; plans ahead and organizes self and others even when under pressure and keeps work on track and on budget; usually produces high-quality work in a timely fashion	• Is a high achiever with a reputation for reliably delivering high quality work products on time

B. Learns continuously

Does the individual:

Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
• Demonstrate a commitment to learning and improving?	• Approaches work and interactions as "standard protocol" without regard to quality	• Sometimes seeks ways to improve, but can revert to "standard protocol"	• Generally looking to learn and improve but excellence is not yet a habit	• Seeks to understand and model excellence and attention to detail in every deliverable and interaction; always looking for ways to improve
• Demonstrate humility and reflect on his/her practice?	• Demands credit for all work and rarely accepts faults in own work or approach	• Reflects, but focuses on justifying own approach at expense of learning insights.	• More focused on learning and improving than on seeking recognition	• Constantly reflects on own practice; apportions credit fairly but is willing to forgo credit himself/herself if that helps achieve the outcome or strengthen the team
• Openly receive and act on feedback?	• Responds negatively or defensively to feedback and does not address opportunities for improvement	• Open to occasional feedback on performance, though reluctant to act on it to improve	• Receptive to feedback and typically makes necessary adjustments	• Is willing and eager to receive feedback on all aspects of his/her work, accepts it graciously and works actively to incorporate it into future work

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Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model

LEADS OTHERS

A. Influences others

Does the individual:

Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
• Lead—not just manage—his/her team?	• Struggles to influence behavior of team members; routinely falls back on authority to secure compliance	• Manages team competently, but relies on formal authority to do so—pays little attention to team culture	• Works to build team culture, but still falls back on authority to get things done	• Inspires confidence in his/her team and builds a culture of excellence—deploys a range of techniques to influence behavior without relying on authority
• Collaborate effectively beyond his/her team?	• Sticks to own "silo"—engages with colleagues/ stakeholders on a reactive or transactional basis	• Has relationships outside own management chain, but does not always use these effectively	• Uses a network of contacts to achieve tactical gains, but does not leverage relationships in the most strategic way	• Builds a strong network of relationships, alliances and partnerships across the SEA and with stakeholders; aligns efforts and resources outside own management chain to implement priority reforms
• Facilitate clear decision making?	• Largely makes decisions in isolation; quality of interactions is low	• Consults when making decisions, but interactions/meetings can lack clarity/focus	• Uses meetings to make decisions efficiently, but does not always facilitate joint ownerships of plans	• Brings internal and external colleagues together to make decisions that drive the work forward; for every interaction/ meeting, defines clear objectives and a plan for achieving them; in every interaction/meeting, demonstrates strong facilitative leadership skills
• Effectively manage contractors outside of agency staff?	• Struggles to manage contracts and consultants effectively	• Manages contracts competently, but struggles to ensure outcomes are achieved within time and budget constraints	• Manages contracts effectively, but does not always achieve sustainable outcomes	• Negotiates contracts effectively to ensure most efficient use of agency resources; utilizes outside contractors to achieve high quality deliverables and to build capacity within the agency, ensuring the work is sustainable

B. Develops others

Does the individual:

Questions to Consider	Beginning	Developing	Strong	Role Model
• Demonstrate a commitment to the growth and continuous improvement of his/ her colleagues and the agency as a whole?	• Sets expectations as if talent is fixed—some people are innately better at certain things and cannot change	• Only focuses on growing talent of some individuals; rarely provides feedback and coaching or only when convenient	• Supports the development of colleagues, though not in a strategic manner (for example, one-off situations, intermittent feedback)	• Demonstrates commitment to growing talent and to the continuous professional development and success of all colleagues by actively creating opportunities for them to grow and develop through observed practice and reflection
• Coach and develop talent?	• Takes no responsibility for the development of colleagues	• Provides occasional feedback and coaching, though it may not be in the most effective manner (for example, lack of specific examples, emotionally charged)	• Commits to coaching and developing the talent of colleagues, but may not provide feedback in a consistent or evidence- based manner	• Demonstrates strong skills in observation, feedback and coaching and gives consistent, evidence-based feedback to supervisees, peers and managers to build a strong team whose ongoing growth is apparent in the quality of his/her work; follows up on feedback to see if action has been taken
• Inspire others to excellence?	• Sets a low bar for performance of colleagues and does little to encourage them to take on difficult tasks	• Inconsistently holds colleagues to a high bar and discourages them from "stretch" assignments	• Holds colleagues accountable for high quality work, but does not encourage others to take on challenging assignments beyond his/ her normal work level	• Insists on excellence and attention to detail in the work of colleagues, particularly supervisees, and inspires others to take on complex challenges

Appendix.
Exercise Guide: SEA Leadership Team Capacity Assessment

Purpose

This 90-minute exercise is designed to walk an individual division or team (for example, the Educator Effectiveness Unit) within an SEA through a collective self-assessment of the team's leadership capacity and identification of opportunities to strengthen areas of challenge. During the exercise, participants rate their team against a set of competencies outlined in the attached framework. The results of these ratings then inform a broader discussion about strengths and opportunities for development within the team. Teams would benefit from regularly returning (every six to nine months) to this exercise to re-assess and capture progress over time.

A similar exercise can be used with this rubric for:

- The Leadership Team assessing the agency as a whole and coming to consensus on ratings.

- Individuals assessing themselves with no group follow-up (confidential/sensitive).

- Providing a framework and structure for feedback conversations between a manager and his/her direct reports.

The competencies serve as a framework for identifying individual areas of strength and challenge, which can be translated into specific behaviors or actions for improvement. These actions could include taking advantage of formal professional development, seeking opportunities for intentional practice and reflection or one-on-one coaching with a mentor.

Learning Objectives

- Identify barriers to building leadership capacity within an SEA.

- Apply the framework to identify current strengths and challenges in building leadership capacity within the team.

- Identify potential next steps for building capacity in identified areas of challenge.

Pre-Work

- Share competency framework with participants in advance of the meeting.

Activity Plan

Time	Learning Objective	Activities	Person(s) Responsible	Materials
5 minutes	• Welcome	• Welcome and quick overview of session objectives • Introduce yourself: Name, role and a characteristic that comes to mind when you think about the word "leadership" (record answers on flipchart)	• Facilitator • Group	• Flipchart • Markers

10 minutes	• Identify barriers to building leadership capacity within an SEA	• Present (10):
		  • Introduce the leadership competency framework and explain its value.
		  • One of the biggest challenges SEAs face is building leadership capacity to implement change among staff at all levels of their organization—particularly among mid-level managers (sometimes called directors) and those folks who report to them.
		    - 2 minute brainstorm: What are the main barriers that prevent SEAs from successfully building leadership capacity? Record on flipchart.
		  • Using this framework, today we are going to individually reflect on our own team's leadership capacity and, then, as a whole group, we will identify and discuss common areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.
			• Facilitator
			• Group brainstorm
				• Slides
				• Framework handout
				• Flipchart
				• Markers

45 minutes	• Apply the framework to identify current strengths and challenges in building leadership capacity within the SEA	• Exercise (45):
		  • Individually, rate the team's overall current level of skill in each competency area.
		    - Take a few minutes to read through the rubric and rate the team for each competency. Record on flip chart. Record evidence for your rating in the final column. Try to be as specific as possible (see templates below for example).
		    - Once all individuals have completed your team ratings, record them on the "Group Reflection" flipchart.
		Note: on the Competency Rubric replace "individual" with "team."
			• Lead introduces exercise	• Flip charts with individual reflection templates for each person, plus one group reflection template
				• Markers

30 minutes	• Identify potential next steps for building capacity in identified areas of challenge	• Exercise (30):
		  • Using the group reflection template, look across all of the ratings.
		  • As a group, come to consensus on an overall team rating for each competency and record. Also, record the evidence for that rating.
		    - Consider the ratings from each person. If no clear answer emerges, push the team toward consensus by asking, "Can everyone live with this rating?"
		  • Then, identify the top three areas of challenge for the team (that is, the lowest ratings).
		    - If other teams within the agency have completed this exercise, it may be useful to do a cross-team comparison. This can help inform whether the identified challenges are limited to a specific division or appear to be agency-wide areas of growth. For example, if an identified challenge is limited to your team, one potential solution would be to learn from other teams that are stronger in this particular competency area.
		  • For each challenge area, ask the team to brainstorm potential ways to address poor performance in this area. Remember: during a brainstorm, all ideas are welcome, no matter how feasible.
		  • Then, narrow the brainstorm to a set of actionable next steps the agency can take to build capacity in this competency area. Identify an owner for each next step.
		    - During the brainstorm, some potentially large or extremely difficult next steps may be identified. This is the time to break those items down into more manageable pieces (for example, if reworking the entire evaluation system is suggested as a potential solution, you could identify a next step of convening the right group of people to determine whether that is a feasible/appropriate path forward).
			• Lead	• Slides
				• Flipchart with group reflection template and next steps template
				• Markers

Reflection Templates

Individual Reflection (Note: the first row is filled in as an example)

Competency	Rating	Rationale
Understands the Work	3 – Strong	Team has a solid understanding of the local and national context for reform (seen in vigorous debates and conversations around policy/practice), though we don't intentionally develop the necessary technical skills to get even better at our specific roles.
Thinks Strategically		
Communicates Effectively		
Delivers Results		
Learns Continuously		
Influences Others		
Develops Others		

Group Reflection

Competency	Person 1	Person 2	Person 3	Person 4	Overall	Rationale
Understands the Work						
Thinks Strategically						
Communicates Effectively						
Delivers Results						
Learns Continuously						
Influences Others						
Develops Others						

Next Steps (Note: the first row is filled in as an example)

Competency	Potential Next Steps
Understands the Work	Conduct a "needs analysis" of technical skills needed by individuals within the team.

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