

# **COMPETENCIES FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP**

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# COMPETENCIES FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

A Framework for Assessment,  
Education, and Research

EDITED BY

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## Chapter 1

# An Introduction to Competencies and Competency-Based Leadership

*Ralph A. Gigliotti*

### The Context of this Collection

This moment in time is a critical one for leaders of organizations across sectors. The volume of books, articles, TED talks, and industry white papers on the subject of leadership and leadership development is extensive – and growing. Much of this work centers around discussions of what are presumed to be the required capacities, capabilities, and competencies associated with successful leadership. Effective leadership skills are increasingly valued in the workplace, and proficiency in these skills remains listed among the curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular goals of colleges and universities (Gigliotti, Ruben, & Goldthwaite, 2017; Seemiller, 2013). There is widespread agreement that leadership matters, especially given the complexity of today’s interconnected and globalized environment and the constantly increasing array of situations in which coordinated action is critical. That said, we continue to wrestle with epistemological questions about the phenomenon of leadership that require further attention. For example, do we know what we mean when we talk about leadership? Although there is a tendency to approach the subject with one’s own workplace, community, or sector in mind, it is important to ask which components of leadership are sector-unique and which cut across contexts? Finally, in what ways does “knowing” about leadership intersect with the “doing” of leadership? These questions will become increasingly important as leadership skills become more essential in the workplace, classroom, and community. Furthermore, as “leadership” becomes a general term for a broad range of behaviors and practices, the need persists for a systematic arrangement of the competencies associated with leadership. Such an arrangement must be comprehensive enough to embrace theory and practice, be applicable in multiple settings, and be able to differentiate generic “horizontal” leadership competencies from the “vertical” competencies that are context-specific (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2017).

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Leadership is essential for adequately addressing the challenges and opportunities contemporary organizations of all sizes and functions must navigate. Central to these challenges and opportunities are three issues that require attention from scholars and practitioners with an interest in leadership and leadership development: clarifying what we mean when we talk about leadership; defining capabilities that are essential to this definition; and designing methods for assessing and developing the knowledge and skills that flow from our understanding of what constitutes leadership.

Efforts to define what we should mean by leadership vary across disciplines and contexts. Within social psychology, leadership is understood to be a “process of influencing others in a manner that enhances their contribution to the realization of group goals” (Platow, Haslam, & Reicher, 2017, p. 339). These authors go on to note “how social influence emerges from psychological in-group members,” and how successful leadership hinges upon a “shared social identity” (p. 339). The traits and personality characteristics of the individual leader are often examined in psychological studies of leadership. Sociologists, on the other hand, “have undertaken research on leadership not by studying the personal characteristics of the leaders, but rather in terms of the relationship between the leaders and the led [and] the different paths to leadership positions” (Guillén, 2010, pp. 224, 225). For economists, such as Bolton, Brunnermeier, and Veldkamp (2010), the focus often centers on the “functional aspects of leadership, the mechanisms of leadership, and on what leadership can accomplish for an organization” (p. 241) — a perspective widely shared among many subdisciplines within business. Leadership in health care, according to Arroliga, Huber, Myers, Dieckert, and Wesson (2014), is undergoing a shift from being based on “conferred authority, defined as power to perform a service” to one that puts “the patient and the community at the center of the medical [or broader health] practice” (p. 247). Finally, within our discipline of communication, leadership is increasingly depicted as a communicative undertaking that is both process-oriented and meaning-centered (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Gigliotti et al., 2017; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Flowing from these definitions and perspectives are additional endeavors aimed at identifying the critical dimensions of leadership within a given scholarly discipline or applied sector. Finally, efforts to apply these insights in the creation of programs that foster and develop increased leadership capacities continue to grow, particularly in response to a rapidly shifting environment that demands effective leadership.

Higher education is one sector currently experiencing significant “disruption” and, according to some pundits, the sector as a whole is on the cusp of dramatic change (Gigliotti, *forthcoming*). The challenges colleges and universities must confront are widespread, including erosion of public trust (Fingerhut, 2017), growing scrutiny from a wide array of internal and external stakeholders (Cowen & Seifter, 2018; Ruben et al., 2017), a concerning and uncertain financial outlook (Calderon & Jones, 2017), and ongoing issues related to access, affordability, and adequate job preparation for students. Underlying these challenges lies the widely debated question of the core purpose of higher education as society continues to evolve.

These many challenges have the potential to blind us to the vast range of opportunities for institutions of higher education. For example, the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce has done extensive research on the connections between education, career qualifications, and the workforce. Their many reports and findings all point to the value of a college degree. In their study, “America’s Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have Nots,” Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Gulish (2016) found that more than 95% of jobs created during the post-recession recovery have been filled by college-educated workers, while those with a high school diploma or less are being left behind. For the first time, employees with a bachelor’s degree or higher comprise a larger share of the workforce (36%) than those with a high school diploma (34%). The future of higher education holds great promise, due in part to advancements in technology that have the potential to improve access to and quality of such an education, innovations in organizational quality and excellence, and the continued growth in the number of “nontraditional” students seeking a college credential (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Additionally, as public confidence wanes, colleges and universities are working to demonstrate their value by increasing their alignment with the workforce, helping students successfully transition from college to the workplace, and evolving to meet the economic demands of the twenty-first century (Gallup, 2018). Finally, for some, the challenges facing colleges and universities provide an opportunity for creative leadership and novel solutions that might not otherwise be possible.

In many ways, these challenges and opportunities are not wholly unique to higher education. They represent a critical juncture for organizations of all kinds where leaders are being held more accountable, stakeholders find themselves more empowered, and our collective understanding of the contemporary organization undergoes a transformation. We could consider the many ways in which leaders in health care, government, nonprofits, and business are navigating existential challenges while also taking advantage of present-day opportunities. Although we must exercise caution in treating this moment ahistorically (Spector, 2016), as if organizations have never faced such a dramatic array of existential challenges and promising opportunities, the need for effective leadership remains a critical topic for scholars and practitioners – and with this comes the need to more fully understand the competencies associated with leadership excellence.

## **The Need for Effective Leadership**

As noted in the *American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) Leadership Handbook* (2010), the section dealing with leadership competencies includes the following preamble: “As our world becomes more complex, the competencies required of today’s leaders likewise become more complex. It becomes more and more difficult to identify the most ‘important’ competencies, because they both multiply and become more complicated. Competencies grow

in breadth as well as depth” (p. 13). The focus on developing leaders who are sensitive to the needs of their many stakeholders and to the culture(s) within which they work, agile in responding to an interdependent set of challenges and circumstances, and open to ongoing learning and continuous improvement remains an imperative for organizations, associations, and societies across the globe. At the same time, the complexity of this current historical moment, as supported by the quote above, intensifies the need for effective leaders, while also problematizing the role of the formal and informal leadership educator in adequately equipping and developing leaders with the needed competencies. For organizations of all kinds, leadership development remains an ongoing priority, and as noted by [McCauley, Van Velsor, and Ruderman \(2010\)](#), the training and development of leadership competencies includes, but extends beyond, individual leader development: “It encompasses the development of the connections among individuals, the development of the capacities of collectives, the development of the connections among collectives in an organization, and the development of the culture and systems in which individuals and collectives are embedded” (p. 26). From this perspective, leadership development does not occur in a vacuum, but rather must be purposefully tailored around and embedded within the culture of a specific setting.

In the context of higher education, leadership development was never a critical priority for colleges and universities; and in many ways, higher education prospered in the latter half of the twentieth century without having to be overly concerned about excellence in leadership or in leadership development ([Lederman, 2017](#)). As we acknowledged in our book, *A Guide for Leaders in Higher Education: Core Concepts, Competencies, and Tools* ([Ruben et al., 2017](#)), individuals with distinguished careers as thought leaders in their fields once possessed the requisite skills for advancing the work of the academy. As the landscape shifted, so too did the need for more effective leadership and more impactful leadership development opportunities. We are seeing an increase in the quantity and diversity of leadership development programs for current and aspiring leaders in higher education ([Gigliotti, 2017](#); [Gmelch & Buller, 2015](#); [Gmelch, Hopkins, & Damico, 2011](#); [Ruben et al., 2017](#)), and this trend will likely continue given the aforementioned challenges facing colleges and universities and the needed advancements in leadership development taking place across sectors ([Kellerman, 2012](#); [Pfeffer, 2015](#)).

Leaders today need a more expansive, cross-cutting set of competencies to maintain and advance their institutions – competencies that have long been valued in other sectors ([Ruben, 2006](#); [Ruben et al., 2017](#)). We have studied this topic closely in our work in the Center for Organizational Leadership (OL) at Rutgers University. OL provides programs and consultation in the areas of organizational advancement and academic and administrative leadership development designed to help administrators, faculty, staff, and graduate and medical students throughout Rutgers University develop and enhance both their knowledge and skill in the areas of leadership and organizational communication. The Center was created in 1993 to serve as a national leader in the areas of organizational effectiveness and self-assessment, leadership development, and

communication improvement. As such, OL serves as a resource not only for Rutgers University, but for the higher education community more generally. Building upon Ruben's (2006, 2012) writing on the leadership competency framework, our approach to training and development highlights the various competencies required for effective leadership – some of which are position-specific, and many others that are cross-cutting and generic in nature. It is our view, one supported by a growing body of theory and research, that a judicious blend of these two types of competencies is essential to the development of outstanding leaders – leaders who are able to integrate an understanding based on intensive knowledge of their discipline, role, institution, and industry, combined with well-developed analytic, communication, organizational, and personal competencies (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017).

## **What is a Competency?**

What follows is a brief summary of the origin of competency-based thinking and an overview of existing competency models that will help provide a foundation for the competency framework presented in this book. The emphasis on leadership competencies is not new, although the use of competencies continues to gain in popularity for assessing and selecting job candidates; managing employee performance; workforce planning; and training, educating, and developing individuals across sectors. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a shift in thinking around personnel management that set the stage for the growth in competency-based frameworks. In predicting job achievement, formal qualifications and the experiences of individual employees became less important and instead, emphasis was soon placed on self-directed behavior in which the employee was responsible for his or her achievements in a formal position (Horton, Farnham, & Hondeghen, 2002). The conceptual roots of competency-based approaches lie in the work of psychologist David McClelland (1973), who proposed we rethink traditional tests of intelligence that were too far removed from practical outcomes. A stronger indicator of one's abilities, according to McClelland, would be to test for personality variables or competencies of life outcomes, such as communication skills, patience, moderate goal-setting, and ego development (taking initiative). The outcomes of such tests would be much more useful to employers than the results of traditional tests of intelligence. The introduction of concepts such as emotional intelligence and cultural and communication competencies was an acknowledgment that understanding and knowledge alone are but one part of what is critical to employee performance, and that effectiveness must also take into account the behavioral translation of knowledge and understanding in appropriate ways. The focus on leadership competencies shifted emphasis from the mainly technical requirements of a specific job to the "softer" interpersonal qualities sought across multiple levels of an organization (Bolden & Gosling, 2006).

As is true for "leadership" and "communication," there exists a wide array of definitions of "competencies" (Shippmann, et al., 2000; Zemke, 1982).

What follows is a summary of definitions of “competencies” from noted scholars and federal agencies:

- A mixture of knowledge, skills, abilities, motivation, beliefs, values, and interests (Fleishman, Wetrogan, Uhlman, & Marshall-Mies, 1995)
- A combination of motives, traits, self-concepts, attitudes or values, content knowledge or cognitive behavior skills; any individual characteristic that can be reliably measured or counted and that can be shown to differentiate superior from average performers (Spencer, McClelland, & Spencer, 1994)
- An underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job (Boyatzis, 1982)
- A measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs in order to successfully perform work roles or occupational functions. Competencies specify the “how” of performing job tasks, or what the person needs to do the job successfully (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2018).
- The skills, knowledge, and behaviors that lead to successful performance (U.K. Civil Service, 2018)

Despite their differences, these various definitions – and others in the literature – all highlight the importance of knowledge and skill, although authors do not always make explicit the inextricable link between knowing and doing (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). The competency framework summarized in this text will carry forward an emphasis on both understanding and performance, for it is through the behavioral translation of insights that the concept of competencies can be particularly useful.

According to Garman and Johnson (2006), “Although competencies have been in use ever since [McClelland’s writing on the subject], their popularity gained considerable momentum in the United States in the early 1990s, partly in response to the accelerated pace of change that many organizations were facing” (p. 13).<sup>1</sup> Through a practice known as competency modeling (Shippmann et al., 2000), job positions today are written based on the needs of the organization and are directly aligned with a core set of competencies required for the position. Training and development efforts highlight a diversity of competencies preferred by individual organizations, as summarized later in this chapter, and managers across sectors are becoming expected to identify, develop, assess, and help align individual competencies with those espoused by the organization. This practice of competency-based management “involves identifying the varied knowledge, values, abilities, and behaviors that people need to possess and exercise to achieve the strategic objectives, goals, and performance expectations of the organization” (Croft & Seemiller, 2017, pp. 7, 8).

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<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed review of the history of competencies and competency-based thinking, see Bolden and Gosling (2006) and Horton et al. (2002).



Within higher education specifically, there is a surge of curricular and co-curricular programs designed in the spirit of competency-based education, many of which are designed for adult learners. In an introductory piece for the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Competency-Based Education*, Nodine (2016) highlights a convergence of factors that help to explain the popularity of competency-based education efforts: (a) the maturing of online technologies for education, particularly for individualized instruction and support; (b) increased institutional acceptance of outcomes-based approaches and online and hybrid instructional formats; (c) increased opportunities for and implications of direct assessment; and (d) pressure from policymakers and other stakeholders to offer lower cost models and to provide opportunities for more working adults to achieve postsecondary credentials that are meaningful in the workplace (p. 8). In addition to specific competency-based education programs, a number of schools are adopting competency-based models for their student leadership efforts, such as the Student Leadership Competencies model (Seemiller, 2013). In developing this model, Seemiller (2013) reviewed the student leadership-oriented learning outcomes of 97 academic accrediting organizations and categorized 60 leadership competencies for the twenty-first century around eight clusters: learning and reasoning, self-awareness and development, interpersonal interaction, group dynamics, civic responsibility, communication, strategic planning, and personal behavior.

## **An Overview of Leadership Competencies**

As noted earlier, many organizations and companies have embraced the need for organization-wide leadership competencies, which are seen as essential for recruitment and selection, workforce planning, performance management, and training and development. According to the [Society for Human Resource Management \(2018\)](#), “Leadership competencies are leadership skills and behaviors that contribute to superior performance.” By developing a broad range of leadership competencies, employees can better understand and engage in behaviors that support the goals, priorities, and values of the organization; leaders can engage in thoughtful and deliberate habits related to recruitment, hiring, performance management, and employee development; and external stakeholders can more fully understand those competencies that are considered critical to organizational excellence and in many ways represent the organization’s competitive advantage or distinctive areas of emphasis. The [Baldrige Performance Excellence Program \(2018\)](#), developed through a public-private partnership dedicated to performance excellence, describes the role of leadership competencies in this way: “Your organization’s core competencies are those strategically important capabilities that provide an advantage in your marketplace or service environment. Core competencies frequently are challenging for competitors or suppliers and partners to imitate, and they provide a sustainable competitive advantage.” The emphasis on leadership competencies, as highlighted by the Society for Human Resource Management and the Baldrige Program, point

to the need for formal and informal leaders to adequately understand self, other, and context, and to purposefully demonstrate behaviors that are both accepted *and* expected by one's organization, company, or institution.

As noted by Ruben (2006), "we have come to recognize that there is no single prescription for leadership excellence, no one formula that ensures success across contexts and circumstances" (p. 2). The focus on leadership competencies allows us to move beyond the individual traits, behaviors, and styles of leaders, and allows us to more fully and purposefully explore the intersection of knowledge and skill. As Ruben goes on to note, "To address the complex array of challenges they face, leaders need a broad array of knowledge and skills – a diverse portfolio of leadership competencies – and the ability to analyze situations and employ those competencies as needed" (p. 2). The list of competencies that are required for effective leadership is wide-ranging. For example, in their study of 2.5 million manager-led teams in 195 countries, Gallup researchers (Adkins, 2015) found that excellent managers are talented in five areas and only one out of 10 people perform at a high level in all five of the following areas:

- Motivation
- Productivity
- Accountability
- Communication
- Judgment

The summary provided in Table 1.1 reflects the type of leadership competencies recognized and espoused by a sample of public and private organizations and professional associations from around the world.

## **Purpose of the Book**

As is apparent from the frameworks summarized in Table 1.1, many scholars and practitioners have introduced leadership models based around a core set of competencies or competency themes. A wide array of self-assessment tools that might be characterized as competency-based in scope have also been developed and popularized. For example, the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 2003) is organized around five central leadership practices: model the way, challenge the process, enable others to act, inspire a shared vision, and encourage the heart. The CliftonStrengths assessment (Gallup, 2018; Roth, 2007), which has been taken by over 20 million people at the time of this writing, is also organized around 34 talent themes which are categorized into four domains: executing talents, influencing talents, relationship-building talents, and strategic thinking talents. In many ways, both the Leadership Practices Inventory and CliftonStrengths assess one's central leadership competencies – the ability to know *and* do, the capacity to analyze situations and employ individual competencies as needed, and the aptitude to analyze and recognize the core leadership practices/strengths/competencies of others in a team setting.