

Leadership Competencies: time to change the tune?

Published in Leadership 2(2), 147-163, 2006.

Richard Bolden (contact author)

Research Fellow

Centre for Leadership Studies

Xfi Building

University of Exeter

Exeter

EX4 4ST

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1392 262579

Fax: +44 (0)1392 262559

Email: Richard.Bolden@exeter.ac.uk.

Richard is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Leadership Studies. His current research explores the interface and interplay between individual and collective approaches to leadership and leadership development and how they contribute towards social change.

and **Jonathan Gosling**

Director

Centre for Leadership Studies

Xfi Building

University of Exeter

Exeter

EX4 4ST

United Kingdom

Email: Jonathan.Gosling@exeter.ac.uk

Jonathan is Professor of Leadership and Director of Executive Education at the University of Exeter. He has designed and directed development programmes for many companies, especially focusing on international and rapidly changing businesses. His current research looks at how leadership can foster continuity through tough transitions. Jonathan was co-founder of the International Masters in Practicing Management (IMPM), a collaboration of business schools around the world.

Abstract

This paper indicates how the competency approach to leadership could be conceived of as a repeating refrain that continues to offer an illusory promise to rationalise and simplify the processes of selecting, measuring and developing leaders yet only reflects a fragment of the complexity that is leadership.

To make this argument we draw on two discrete sets of data: a review of leadership competency frameworks and an analysis of participant reports from a reflective leadership development programme. A lexical analysis comparing the two data sets highlights a substantial difference with regards to the relative importance placed on the moral, emotional and relationship dimensions of leadership.

The implications of these differences are considered, as are ways in which the competency approach could be aligned more closely with the current and future needs of leaders and organisations. In particular, we argue that a more discursive approach that helps reveal and challenge underlying organisational assumptions is likely to be more beneficial if organisations are looking to move beyond individualistic notions of leadership to more inclusive and collective forms.

Methodological issues are also raised around the comparative analysis (both semantic and linguistic) of apparently incommensurable texts.

Key words: competencies, emotion, ethics, leadership, lexical analysis, management, standards

Leadership Competencies: time to change the tune?

Introduction

The concept of management competency has become ubiquitous within the field of performance assessment and development within organisations. In this paper we consider how the transfer of this concept to the assessment and development of 'leaders' can be considered as a repeating refrain that reinforces particular ways of thinking and behaving that ultimately limits the ability of organisations to engage with and embed more inclusive and collective ('post heroic') forms of leadership.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a refrain (noun) as "a phrase or verse recurring at intervals, esp. at the end of each stanza of a poem or song". To this extent, the competency approach can be considered as a repetitive call that gives some structure and predictability to the field of management and leadership. When used as a verb (or an alternative form of the noun), however, the word takes on a quite different meaning, that of restraint: "to hold back, restrain (a person or thing) *from* something, esp. some act or course of action". Considering competencies as a refrain therefore brings to light a number of issues including how the concept has repeatedly over time been used to give a sense of boundedness (or restrictive structure) to the processes of 'management' and now 'leadership'; how the use of this particular language can reinforce and disguise assumptions about the nature of organisational life; and how by restricting consideration of the leadership role to observable, tangible measures the language of 'competency' neglects some other equally important dimensions.

Like a musical refrain, competencies offer a repetitive 'hook' that offers a sense of structure and consistency but also act as an injunction that obliges us to refrain from further thematic development. Thus, the refrain encourages us to return to the same familiar melody rather than pursuing other avenues of thought and expression that might, from the point of melodic coherence, be considered a distraction. In the case of leadership competencies, we argue, this repeated refrain reinforces a focus on the individual 'leader' whilst restricting consideration of 'leadership' as a distributed relational process.

In order to make this argument we begin with a brief history of the competency movement and then move on to consider some of the main critiques of this approach and how leadership competencies are being misused in assessment and development. We then consider how a more discursive use of the language of competencies could assist a more effective articulation of organisational values and objectives and test this possibility through a comparative analysis of the language contained in leadership competency frameworks with that arising from the reflective discussions of practising managers. A lexical analysis comparing the two data sets highlights a substantial difference with regards to the relative importance placed on the moral, emotional and relational dimensions of leadership. We conclude, therefore, that although leadership competencies purport to notate the melody (or map to the terrain) of leadership they miss significant elements of the musical landscape and so inhibit a more subtle appreciation of the complex ethical and relational processes of sense making and collective responsibility within organisations.

A brief history of competencies

The competency movement has its origins in the changing economic and political context of the late 1960s, with the concept of ‘managerial competency’ largely arising from the work of McClelland (McClelland, 1973) and the McBer consultancy group in the 1970s (see Horton, 2002 for a good review). A major study commissioned by the American Management Association in the early 1980s grounded the concept in behavioural and performance terms, with a job competency being defined as “an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job” (Boyatzis, 1982: 21). Boyatzis identified 19 generic behavioural competencies associated with above average managerial performance, grouped into five clusters (goal and action management, leadership, human resource management, focus on others and directing subordinates). The popularity of these ideas spread to the UK where they were embraced by the government, initially in the Review of Vocational Qualifications report (De Ville, 1986) and then the development and implementation of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) in management (MCI, 1987; 1997). The competency approach now appears to be fast becoming one of the most dominant models for management and leadership assessment and development in the UK (Miller et al., 2001; Rankin, 2002).

Despite the common origins and similarity of terms used in the UK and US, however, the 1980s and 1990s saw a divergence in the manner in which the concepts surrounding competencies were being applied. Sparrow (1997) distinguished three main categories of approach. The first of these was the *management competence* (or ‘technical/functional’) approach developed in the UK which depended primarily on functional analysis of job roles to determine expected standards of workplace behaviour. This approach is most evident in the use of the NOS to determine National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). The second approach, derived from the work of Boyatzis and colleagues at McBer consultants in the US, identified *behavioural competencies* of effective and superior managers. In this case, the aim was not to describe a baseline measure of acceptable performance but to promote the behaviours that lead to enhanced performance. Thirdly Sparrow distinguished the *organisational competency* (or strategic ‘core competence’) approach that shifted attention from the individual to the organisation and the business processes leading to enhanced innovation, learning and performance (e.g. Goddard, 1997).

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 indicates how these conceptual distinctions point to some fundamental differences in the ways in which managerial competency can be conceived, including: as a baseline standard versus an aspirational goal; or as a set of individual competencies versus a series of shared organisational capabilities. Sparrow (2002: 112) points out, though, that “organisational practice has of course muddied the distinction between the three perspectives, with competency-based systems operating using different elements of managerial competence, behavioural competency and organisational competency thinking at different levels of the hierarchy and at different points of time”. In the current paper we will focus on the first and second definitions of competency (i.e. as an acceptable standard of practice and/or a behavioural predictor of improved performance) as these are frequently combined within formal individualistic competency frameworks.

The competency approach: a repeating refrain?

Alongside the growing use of competencies within organisations a parallel debate has raised significant concerns about their effectiveness and the extent to which they really relate to improved or superior performance at either an individual or organisational level. Five of the more commonly cited weaknesses include: (1) the reductionist way in which this approach fragments the management role rather than representing it as an integrated whole (Ecclestone, 1997; Grugulis, 1998; Lester, 1994); (2) the universalistic/generic nature of competencies that assumes a common set of capabilities no matter what the nature of the situation, individuals or task (Grugulis, 2000; Loan-Clarke, 1996; Swailes and Roodhouse, 2003); (3) the focus on current and past performance rather than future requirements (Cullen, 1992; Lester, 1994); (4) the way in which competencies tend to emphasise measurable behaviours and outcomes to the exclusion of more subtle qualities, interactions and situational factors (Bell et al., 2002); and (5) the rather limited and mechanistic approach to education that often results (Brundrett, 2000).

Despite these criticisms, however, the competency movement has gathered momentum rather than slowed down and recent years have seen an expansion of the approach to incorporate leadership as well as management. Largely building on the distinction made between management and leadership by writers such as Zaleznik (1977) and Kotter (1990), leadership competencies shift the emphasis from the mainly technical requirements of specific job roles to the softer inter-personal qualities sought from people at many levels across the organisation. Thus, with the introduction of the concept of 'leadership', competencies have been extended to a wider population of employees (including those in more senior roles, as well as those without formal management responsibilities) than those for whom management competencies were initially devised. This expansion of the concept of competencies raises further concerns because of its tendency to disguise and embed rather than expose and challenge certain assumptions about the nature and work of leadership.

Buckingham (2001) argues that leadership competencies encourage conformity rather than diversity at an individual level. Drawing on the experience of the Gallup organisation he argues that, no matter how well-intentioned, the competency approach is founded on three flawed assumptions: (1) that those who excel in the same role display the same behaviours; (2) that these behaviours can be learnt; and (3) that improving on your weaknesses leads to success. He argues against the increasing use of competencies to prescribe and assess managerial behaviour and, instead, proposes that organisations should turn their attention to building on individual strengths and differences, with a focus on outcomes rather than behaviours. These conclusions are supported by numerous studies that reveal individual leaders achieving similar results via different approaches and leaders managing to be successful despite significant personal flaws (e.g. Hunt and Laing, 1997; McCall, 1998).

At the organisational level Salaman (2004) reveals four fundamental, yet seldom acknowledged, characteristics of the competency approach. Firstly, by describing the management or leadership role, the competency approach puts into place a framework for measuring, monitoring, comparing and regulating the behaviour of managers. Secondly, competencies require a translation from *strategy*, to *organisation*, and to *individual* manager – frameworks thus tend to disguise key organisational

assumptions, objectives and priorities, which may remain hidden and unquestioned. Thirdly, as well as defining the qualities required of a manager a list of competencies also serves as a specification for further improvement, thus “the first management competence is commitment to the competence framework itself and, thereafter, acceptance of responsibility for self-regulation and self-management in terms of these competences” (ibid: 71). And fourthly, the competence approach expects much more of managers than before – transferring responsibility for maintaining motivation and development, from Human Resource (HR) specialists to the individual employee.

Salaman (2004) concludes by proposing that, like management competencies, leadership competencies will fail to deliver their promise: “... the problems it promised to resolve are not capable of resolution and its promise consisted largely of a sleight of hand whereby organizational problems were simply restated as management responsibilities” (ibid: 75). Leadership, he implies, can not be dissociated from the temporal and situational context. In the presence of an incompatible organisational system or culture a leader may remain powerless to achieve what is expected of him/her. Likewise, failure to consider the broader social context of leadership is to miss the significant role played by other factors (including followers, managerial rewards and sanctions, beliefs about legitimate authority, organisational systems, nature of the work and cultural environment) in the leadership process.

This perhaps points to a more fundamental problem with the competency approach. Leadership occurs in situation and can not be distilled into a number of constituent elements (other than perhaps for descriptive processes) (Bolden et al., 2006; Wood, 2005). In the same way as Magritte’s famous painting of a pipe with the legend ‘ceci n’est pas une pipe’ we should remind ourselves that competency frameworks are simply a representation of leadership rather than the real thing (if, indeed, a concrete leadership entity could ever be argued to exist!).

Continuing the musical metaphor, a competency framework could be considered like sheet music, a diagrammatic representation of the melody. It is only in the arrangement, playing and performance, however, that the piece truly comes to life. Simply being able to read music or play particular notes does not make someone an excellent musician and nor does ones ability to play solo necessarily ensure that they can be an effective member of a group or orchestra. Likewise being a successful classical musician, for example, is no guarantee that someone will be able to transfer their talent to different musical genres such as jazz, folk or rock. Thus, whilst a competency framework may be a useful guide to how the melody may sound, if we focus too closely on the written music we may miss the most interesting and significant features of the performance, producing only sterile renditions devoid of emotion.

This is one sense in which the competency approach to leadership can be considered like a repeating refrain, whereby it reinforces both the notion of the ‘ideal’ leader and a concept of the rational science of management. Unlike music, however, which adapts its instruments and scales to different genres and moods, the competency approach applies the same techniques with little consideration of how well suited they may be to current and emerging social and organisational contexts.

The misuse of leadership competencies

Miller et al. (2001) identify two primary reasons why organisations use competencies: (1) to help increase the performance of employees via appraisal, training and other personnel practices; and (2) as means for articulating corporate values and objectives. As the old saying goes, though, “for the man who has a hammer everything looks like a nail”: a competency framework in the hands of an over zealous HR manager or consultant can be taken as a solution for everything (selection, recruitment, training, development, appraisal, promotion and reward); to do so, though, is risky.

Firstly, Conger (2005) identifies that using management and leadership competencies (and associated tools such as 360 degree appraisal) for both assessment *and* development seriously undermines their utility for developmental purposes. Developmental tools, he argues, place an emphasis on openness and honesty, yet their application to assessment introduces a competing dynamic of complicity and alignment. This means that issues that might be useful within a developmental discourse are withheld if it is expected that they will negatively impact upon the recipient’s career or reward opportunities and peers may well begin to collude in multi-rater appraisal exercises.

Another danger of using competencies to drive a wide range of organisational practices is they may become used for purposes for which they were not designed. Facet theory (Donald, 1995; Levy, 1994), a key principle of effective instrument design, proposes that you should first consider the fundamental characteristics (or ‘facets’) of what makes a tool effective for its intended purpose. Thus, for example, a tool intended for selection will be designed to filter out as many people as possible whereas one for development will seek to identify development opportunities for everyone. Leadership and management competencies, on the other hand, are usually derived from functional job analysis of professional roles with limited concern as to how they could be used for development or assessment of others.

A related issue regards the partial or questionable empirical evidence on which most competency frameworks are based. The NHS Leadership Qualities framework, for instance, is applied across *all* parts of the NHS despite the initial research on which it is based being derived solely from self-report data from Chief Executives and Directors (NHS Leadership Centre, 2003). Furthermore leadership competency frameworks frequently confuse ‘independent’ (cause) and ‘dependent’ (outcome) variables in a similar way as Hunt (1991: 214) highlights how transformational leadership theory alternates between presenting leadership as a leader behaviour or follower response. Such confusion risks the introduction of tautologies whereby, for example, a “charismatic leader” is defined as “one who has charisma” – something seen remarkably often in the behavioural descriptors accompanying competency frameworks and which tells us nothing about content or causality!

A further difficulty arising from the misuse or over-reliance on leadership competencies is that they can create unrealistic expectations of performance. Mintzberg (2004: 257) points out that “acquiring various competencies does not necessarily make a manager competent” and Boyatzis (1993) identified that in order for managers and leaders to display the competencies acquired through training and development they require the support and encouragement of their own managers.

Thus, simply acquiring a competency does not necessarily mean that you will use it and nor does the absence of a competency make you 'incompetent'. Indeed, studies of executive derailment actually show that excessively high levels of a 'beneficial' competency can lead to failure; thus excessive team orientation can turn to indecisiveness, integrity to zeal and global vision to lack of local focus (McCall, 1998). Contrary to the assumption of most leadership competency frameworks, therefore, there is neither a linear, nor necessarily causal, relationship between competencies and job performance.

And finally, at the heart of the competency approach lie a number of philosophical assumptions about the nature of organisational life. Whilst it is possible that many people working in the organisations that use them may agree with these assumptions the fact that they remain largely hidden and obscured means that they go unnoticed and unchallenged. Thus, for example, the competency approach is founded upon an objectivist view of the world that considers the worker and the work as discrete entities. The problem with this perspective is revealed in Sandberg's (2000) research with car assembly workers that found work competencies to arise, not out of acquiring a pre-defined set of capabilities but, as a result of the worker's conception of the ultimate purpose of his/her work. Lawler (2005: 215) argues that the objectivist approach, by focussing on 'objective' measures, minimises consideration of the social construction of reality and thus "fails to capture the subjective experience of the leadership relationship". Similarly, the strong emphasis on individual behaviour means that outcomes are invariably attributed to the individual rather the collective and/or contextual. Such a tendency shapes how we think of leadership, where we look to for evidence and results in us only seeing what we are looking for and not other, equally important, factors: changing our frame of reference may well change the relationships we reveal (Wood, 2005).

From the discussion so far, therefore, it would appear that as a tool for selection, assessment and development the competency approach is seriously flawed. What then of its appropriateness as a means for articulating corporate values and objectives?

Competencies as a means for articulating organisational values and objectives

The discussion has revealed considerable grounds for questioning the manner in which leadership competency frameworks are being used as a fix-all for leadership and management selection and development in organisations. Despite this, policy makers, employers and consultants continue to be attracted by the promise of competencies and there is some evidence that, in certain situations, their use is associated with improved organisational performance (e.g. Sparrow, 2002; Winterton and Winterton, 1997). The evidence, however, remains patchy and inconclusive particularly with regards to *how* the use of competencies might impact upon performance at an organisational level: is it through the measurement framework they provide or the discourse they invoke?

Pondy (1978) calls leadership a 'language game' whereby, through the effective use of rhetoric and 'framing' (Conger, 1991; Fairhurst, 2005; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996), leaders can shape the understanding of others (often termed 'followers'). Bennis (1993, cited in Goddard, 1997: 51) proposes that "effective leaders put words to the formless longings and deeply felt needs of others. They create communities out of words." Likewise, Cuno (2005: 205) proposes that "one often hears that leaders lead

through action, by example. But more often, and often more effectively, leaders lead through their words, by acts of speech, as it were.” If this is true then competencies could, perhaps, offer a powerful tool for sense-making and communication within organisations. If used inductively, as a means for opening a dialogue about what managers and leaders *could do*, rather than deductively for prescribing what managers and leaders *should do*, competency frameworks could offer a means of addressing and discussing both individual and organisational needs within a specific context. That is to say competencies could be conceived of, like 360 degree appraisal, as ‘hypothesis generating’ rather than ‘hypothesis testing’ and thus help drive a developmental discourse (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2004).

The discursive use of competencies as a language for organisational leadership could, in some way, compensate for the weaknesses of their use in a more formal assessment mode. To explore this possibility we conducted a comparative analysis of the language of competency frameworks and that of practising managers to see if competency frameworks do, indeed, offer a vocabulary with which organisations can articulate and express their priorities and help make sense of the lived experience of people in leadership roles.

A comparative analysis of the language of leadership competencies

If competencies offer a language for discussions about the nature of leadership in organisations then one would expect them to draw attention to the most significant facets of leadership roles. Furthermore, this should be expressed in a manner that is shared by the members of the organisation charged with articulating and disseminating organisational values and objectives: i.e. practising managers.

Methodology

In order to explore this possibility we compared and contrasted both the meanings and language embodied within two quite different sets of text, each purporting to represent leadership roles.

The first set of data was a collection of leadership competency and quality frameworks collated as part of a scoping study for the development of the National Occupational Standards in management and leadership (Bolden et al., 2003). A total of 29 frameworks were selected covering a wide spectrum of UK and international organisations, including nine private sector (British Telecom, Lufthansa, Pfizer, Shell, etc.), twelve public sector (Ministry of Defence, National College for School Leadership, National Health Service, Senior Civil Service, etc.) and eight generic/cross-sectoral (Chartered Institute of Management, Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership, Investors in People, etc.).

The second set of data was a series of feedback reports from reflective retreats run for practising managers by the Windsor Leadership Trust (WLT). A total of 38 reports were analysed, covering the period of October 2001 to May 2004, and representing the views and inputs of approximately 250 practising managers (Bolden, 2004; Bolden and Gosling, 2003). These reports capture the conclusions and insights of groups of five to eight newly appointed and experienced leaders (from all sectors, mainly in the UK) participating in four or five day retreats where, through a mix of plenary sessions and facilitated discussions, they were given the opportunity to reflect on the nature of leadership and the challenges that they faced.

If competencies offer a comprehensive language for articulating experiences of leadership and generating meaningful hypotheses within a community of leaders, then they should incorporate both the issues raised in the reflective reports and the language used to express them. To investigate this notion we conducted two comparisons: firstly a semantic analysis to reveal the underlying sense of meaning in each data set and secondly a linguistic analysis of the actual words used.

The semantic analysis involved coding the underlying meaning present in each data set through a combination of open-ended content analysis (whereby the main themes were identified within each text) and summary analysis (whereby texts were interpreted with regards to the wider leadership literature). This type of analysis was considered appropriate because of its ability to capture the semantic content of the texts and to begin to reveal any underlying assumptions such as those alluded to by Salaman (2004: 71).

The linguistic analysis took the main themes identified in the reflective reports and searched for the extent to which they were captured in an overt manner within the competency frameworks. In order to do this, the 29 competency frameworks were imported into SphinxSurvey Lexica for lexical analysis: a technique that enables the comparison of texts on the basis of word lexicons (see Bolden and Moscarola (2000) for a more detailed description). This technique was deemed particularly appropriate when considering leadership as a language game as it enables a direct comparison of the *actual words* used rather than just the *sense they convey* and offers a quantifiable measure of the extent to which competency frameworks incorporate specific terms.

Thus, by concentrating on the words used we acknowledge that meanings are constructed from lexical material (words and phrases) embedded in specific relations of power and influence (Marturano et al., 2005) and that, even if meanings are shared between the two texts, a misalignment of vocabularies will seriously inhibit the capacity of leaders and managers to articulate them in an effective way.

Results

From the semantic analysis of the competency frameworks it would appear that a somewhat limited version of 'transformational leadership' (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1994) is being promoted in most frameworks. They tend to go beyond simple definitions of behaviours to also consider some of the cognitive, affective and inter-personal qualities of leaders, however, the role of others seems to be recognised in only a rather simplistic, unidirectional manner. Leadership is thus presented as a set of traits, qualities and behaviours possessed *by the leader* that encourage the participation, development, and commitment *of others* within the organisation. The 'leader' is thus seen to act as an energiser, catalyst and visionary equipped with a range of abilities (communication, problem-solving, people management, self-awareness, etc.) that can be applied across a diverse range of situations and contexts. Whilst situational factors may be considered, they are not generally viewed as barriers to an individual's ability to lead under different circumstances (it is assumed that they simply need to apply a different combination of skills). In addition to inter-personal skills, the leader is also expected to display excellent information processing, project management, customer service and delivery skills, along with proven business and political acumen. They build partnerships, walk the talk, show incredible drive and

enthusiasm, and get things done. Furthermore, the leader demonstrates innovation, creativity and thinks ‘outside the box’. They identify opportunities, like to be challenged and are prepared to take risks.

Semantic analysis of the reflective reports revealed a range of issues and concerns, including the changing nature of society (globalisation, shifting power structures, unpredictable and discontinuous change, demographic shift, etc.); the changing nature of work (flexible working, decreasing job security, mid-life career changes, increasing power of the corporation, competing demands, transparency and accountability, social responsibility, business ethics, etc.) and the desirable qualities of leaders (including an ability to be responsive to the changing context of leadership, along with qualities such as integrity, moral courage, self-awareness, reflection, empathy, emotional intelligence, humility, respect, trust, clarity of vision, and an ability to influence, motivate and inspire). Overall, the concerns of particular importance to the authors of these reports were identified as: a genuine personal vision based on self-belief and moral courage; the ethical and social responsibilities of leaders; the importance of self-awareness and reflection; shared, emergent and situational leadership; balancing leadership dilemmas that arise from complex and uncertain situations; the development of current and future leaders; and the impact of wider social change such as shifting ethnic identities and national allegiance.

Both the review of competency frameworks and reflective reports, therefore, reveal insights into current conceptualisations of leadership and management and an anticipation of future trends. The outcomes with regards to the relative emphasis on differing dimensions of leadership, however, are quite different. The competency review stresses primarily individual skills and capabilities, with a focus on performance and outputs: the leader is seen as a lynchpin because of his/her ability to manage and motivate others. The reflective reports, on the other hand, emphasise above all the moral and relational dimensions of leadership: the leader makes sense of complexity and uncertainty on the basis of strong moral beliefs and an emotional engagement with others.

At a semantic level, therefore, there appears to be a difference between the content of the leadership competency frameworks and reflective reports that might limit the ability of the former to express the leadership role in a meaningful way. The extent of this difference was explored through the lexical analysis which searched the verbatim text of competency frameworks for evidence of themes revealed as significant in the reflective reports. The main findings are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 reveals the key themes from the reflective reports that are not expressed in the language of the competency frameworks. In particular ‘vision’ and ‘values’ are absent in a third of the competency frameworks analysed; ‘trust’, ‘ethics’, ‘inspiration’, ‘adaptability’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘resilience’ are absent in two thirds, and ‘beliefs’, ‘moral’, ‘courage’, ‘humility’, ‘emotion’, ‘reflection’ and ‘work-life balance’ are absent in over 80%.

Whilst these findings may underestimate the number of competency frameworks referring to each theme (no consideration was taken of synonyms or expressions) they

do highlight a serious lack of consideration of many aspects of the leadership role as identified by practising managers, especially the moral, emotional and relational dimensions of leadership.

Discussion

These findings indicate a disturbing gap between the attributes required of leaders as conveyed by practising managers and popular leadership competency frameworks. Such a discrepancy could result from a number of factors including methodological differences in the manner in which data were derived (the reflective reports were the outcome of a leadership development programme, whilst the competency frameworks were largely the outcome of functional job analysis); programme objectives (the reflective reports seek to capture the learning of participants, whilst the competency frameworks seek to define desirable leadership behaviours and attributes); and the nature of participants (the reflective reports identify the concerns of newly appointed and developing strategic leaders, whilst the competency frameworks define leadership attributes throughout the organisation). Furthermore, it is probable that the views expressed by managers in the WLT sample are somewhat idealistic, based on the rhetoric expressed during the development events and an idealised concept of what leadership *should be* as opposed to what it *actually is* (for a more balanced account of the complexities of organisational life see Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Regardless of the cause, however, the implications for leadership development and practice are significant.

If leadership is considered as a language game then this discrepancy would imply that competency frameworks do not provide a sufficiently rich vocabulary for the generation of hypotheses about effective leadership (Holman and Hall, 1996). It would seem that in their desire to construct an objective, measurable representation of the leader competency-based approaches tend to neglect the more subtle moral, emotional and relational aspects of leadership. Emphasis is frequently placed almost exclusively on observable characteristics and behaviours to the near exclusion of moral and emotional concerns, yet many authors (e.g. Ciulla, 1998; Gini, 1997; Goleman et al., 2002; Safty, 2003) argue that it is these dimensions that lie at the heart of leadership. Indeed, even the concept of transformational leadership (which seems to underlie many frameworks) is founded upon a notion of the leader's moral responsibility to his/her followers and his/her ability to engage and inspire them at an emotional level (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1994; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999, Burns, 1978).

The image of leadership conveyed in many competency frameworks could almost lead us to believe that leaders might exist in splendid isolation, with no need for meaningful relationship with others, let alone require their belief, commitment or acquiescence. Such an approach neglects both more recent theorising on more inclusive 'post-heroic' forms of leadership (e.g. Binney et al., 2005; Drath, 2001; Mintzberg, 1999; Raelin, 2003) and accounts that question the extent to which individualistic models of leadership are associated with improved performance (Gronn, 1995) or ethical business practice (Price, 2003).

Furthermore, recent research on the qualities and attributes of effective leaders has revealed a difference between the way in which good leadership is conceived of in the UK and the US (Alimo-Metcalf and Alban-Metcalf, 2005). In the US (from where

much traditional leadership theory has originated) the image of the leader is primarily that of someone 'distant' – removed from the day-to-day experience of others within the organisation – whereas in the UK, leaders tend to be conceived of as someone more 'nearby' – in daily contact with his/her followers. The style of leadership desired of nearby leaders tends to be far more inclusive than that of the distant leader and thus points to a significant cultural dimension to the recognition of what it means to be a leader that would challenge the model currently embodied by most the frameworks we investigated.

Having identified a number of striking absences within leadership competency frameworks, however, we would not want the reader to assume that by plugging these gaps it will render the approach infallible. Adding elements relating to the moral, emotional and collective aspects of leadership, introducing a language more akin to that of practising managers and improving the empirical research base will, no doubt, go some way to improving their contribution to developmental discourse but will still fail to engage with the more fundamental issues of power and control identified by Salaman (2002). Wheatley (2001) argues passionately against the global introduction of the 'American management model' that pressurises leaders to focus on numeric measures of efficiency and narrow measures of success and forces local leaders to "forfeit their own experience and wisdom about what works best within their own traditions and practices". Within the UK we increasingly hear talk of 'distributed', 'collective' and 'emergent' leadership yet the individualistic nature of most competency frameworks and the performance mechanisms they put into place severely limits the possibility of this occurring in practice or even being discussed by people both within and outside formal leadership roles. We would propose that it is precisely these varying concepts and representations of leadership that should be made open to scrutiny as they are pivotal to the processes of sense making in which the leader (and all other actors in the leadership process) is engaged and we feel this is only possible through more open-ended discursive, reflective and experiential approaches.

In brief, the competency discourse is not only a repeating 'refrain', it is also a restraint, restricting the kind of talk that most contributes to effective collaboration and collective engagement. It tends to become a somewhat bland noise far too limited in its vocabulary to express the fascination, emotion and complexities of leadership in action.

Conclusions

By comparing these two texts we have made explicit the meaning that practising managers attach to their work themselves: i.e. the emotional and moral labour of creating choices and meanings for themselves and others. Competency frameworks, however, tend to reinforce individualistic practices that dissociate leaders from the relational environment in which they operate and could, arguably, inhibit the emergence of more inclusive and collective forms of leadership.

Recent research into leadership development (e.g. Burgoyne et al., 2004) indicates that key predictors of impact include opportunities for constructive feedback (assisting self-awareness and reflection), integration with organisational systems and strategy (increasing situational relevance) and facilitation and support from managers both prior to and following the intervention (optimising opportunities for

experimentation and experience). Much of this, however, is inhibited by the competency approach that appears to shift the burden of responsibility onto the individual manager and/or leader with little concern for the context and relationships in which they find themselves.

To escape from the repetitive refrain of competencies we believe that more consideration should be placed on reflection, discussion and experience. Organisations should endeavour to develop opportunities for their members to articulate and explore their experience of leadership in all its richness. To extend the musical metaphor, we should encourage people in leadership roles to not only develop their music reading and basic playing skills (i.e. competencies) but also their interpretation, improvisation and performance abilities (i.e. emotion, intuition, moral judgement, experience, etc.).

However, although the desire to select and measure people in leadership positions will remain, simply adding more terms to competency lists will not solve the problem. It will fail to capture the sense-making nature of such conversations and how meanings emerge and transform over time. At best a competency framework will only ever be a simple representation of a highly complex and changing landscape.

All of this gives weight to the body of research exploring the symbolic and narrative processes of collective sense making in organisations. It supports a shift from individualistic notions of leadership to more inclusive and relational perspectives. Nonetheless, given the ubiquity of competency frameworks attention should be given to the processes by which such approaches can contribute towards enhanced organisational performance in order to better understand the applications for which they are suited. They may after all be turned to some effect, in the same way in which certain composers have used familiar refrains in new ways so as to create genuinely innovative and ground-breaking music. Through such an approach it may be possible to breathe new life into the practice and performance of leadership.

References

- Alimo-Metcalfe, B. and Alban-Metcalfe, J. (2004) Leadership in public sector organizations. In J. Storey (ed.) *Leadership in Organizations: Current issues and key trends*, London: Routledge, 173-202.
- Alimo-Metcalfe, B. and Alban-Metcalfe, J. (2005) Leadership: time for a new direction? *Leadership*, 1(1), 51-71.
- Bass, B.M. (1985) *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. New York: Free Press.
- Bass, B.M. and Avolio, B.J. (1994) *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Bass, B. and Steidlmeier, P. (1999) Ethics, character, and authentic transformational leadership behaviour, *Leadership Quarterly*, 10, 181-217.
- Bell, E., Taylor, S. and Thorpe, R. (2002) A step in the right direction? Investors in People and the learning organization, *British Journal of Management*, 13, 161-171.
- Bennis, W. (1993) *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley
- Binney, G., Wilke, G. and Williams, C. (2005) *Living Leadership: A practical guide for ordinary heroes*. London: FT Prentice-Hall.

- Bolden, R. (2004) *The Future of Leadership: Synopsis of Initial Windsor Meeting Reports from September 2003 – May 2004*. Report for the Windsor Leadership Trust, Centre for Leadership Studies, Exeter, August 2004.
- Bolden, R. and Gosling, J. (2003) *Leadership, Society and the Next Ten Years*. Report for the Windsor Leadership Trust, Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, July 2003.
- Bolden, R. and Moscarola, J. (2000) Bridging the quantitative-qualitative divide: the lexical approach to textual data analysis, *Social Science Computer Review*, 18(4), 450-460.
- Bolden, R., Gosling, J., Marturano, A. and Dennison, P. (2003) *A Review of Leadership Theory and Competency Frameworks*. Report for Chase Consulting and the Management Standards Centre, Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, June 2003.
- Bolden, R., Wood, M. and Gosling, J. (2006) Is the NHS Leadership Qualities framework missing the wood for the trees? In OBHC (Eds) *Innovations in Health Care: A Reality Check*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1982) *The Competent Manager: a model for effective performance*. New York: Wiley.
- Boyatzis, R. (1993) Beyond competence: the choice to be a leader, *Human Resource Management Review*, 3(1), 1-14.
- Brown, P. and Hesketh, A. (2004) *The Mismanagement of Talent*. Oxford: OUP.
- Brundrett, M. (2000) The Question of Competence; the origins, strengths and inadequacies of a leadership training paradigm, *School Leadership and Management*, 20(3), 353-369.
- Buckingham, M. (2001) Don't waste time and money, *Gallup Management Journal*, December 3, 2001.
- Burgoyne, J. Hirsh, W. and Williams, S. (2004) *The Development of Management and Leadership Capability and its Contribution to Performance: The evidence, the prospects and the research need*. DfES Research Report RR560.
- Burns, J. M. (1978) *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Ciulla, J. B. (1998) *Ethics: The Heart of Leadership*. Westport, CT: Quorum.
- Conger, J. (1991) Inspiring others: the language of leadership, *Academy of Management Executive*, 5(1), 31-45.
- Conger, J. (2005) *360 and Competency Frameworks: are we in the Land of Oz?* Presentation to the Corporate Research Forum, London, 22 June.
- Cullen, E. (1992) A vital way to manage change, *Education*, November 13, 3-17.
- Cuno, J. (2005) Telling stories: rhetoric and leadership, a case study, *Leadership*, 1(2), 205-213.
- De Ville, O. (1986), *The Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales*. London: HMSO.
- Donald, I. (1995) Facet theory: defining research domains. In G.M. Breakwell, S. Hammond, and C. Fife-Schaw (Eds) *Research Methods in Psychology*, London: Sage, pp116-137.
- Drath, W. (2001) *The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ecclestone, K. (1997) Energising or enervating: implications of National Vocational Qualifications in professional development, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 49, 65-79.
- Fairhurst, G. (2005) Reframing 'the art of framing': problems and prospects for leadership, *Leadership*, 1(2), 165-185.

- Fairhurst, G. and Sarr, R. (1996) *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gini, A. (1997) Moral leadership: an overview, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 16, 323-330.
- Goddard, J. (1997) The architecture of core competence, *Business Strategy Review*, 8(1), 43-52.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. and McKee, A. (2002) *Primal Leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Gronn, P. (1995) Greatness re-visited: the current obsession with transformational leadership, *Leading and Managing*, 1(1), 14-27.
- Grugulis, I. (1997) The Consequences of competence: a critical assessment of the Management NVQ, *Personnel Review* 26(6), 428-444.
- Grugulis, I. (1998) 'Real' managers don't do NVQs: a review of the new management 'standards', *Employee Relations*, 20, 383-403.
- Grugulis, I. (2000) The Management NVQ: a critique of the myth of relevance, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 52, 79-99.
- Holman, D. and Hall, L. (1996) Competence in management development: rites and wrongs, *British Journal of Management*, 7, 191-202.
- Horton, S. (2002) The competency movement. In S. Horton, A. Hondeghem and D. Farnham (Eds) *Competency Management in the Public Sector: European variations on a theme*. IOS Press: Brussels, pp3-15.
- Hunt, J.G. (1991) *Leadership: A New Synthesis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Hunt, J. and Laing, B. (1997) Leadership: the role of the exemplar, *Business Strategy Review*, 8(1), 31-42.
- Kotter, J.P. (1990) *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs From Management*. New York: Free Press.
- Lawler, J. (2005) The essence of leadership? Existentialism and leadership, *Leadership*, 1(2), 215-231.
- Leonard, D. and Swap, W. (2004) Deep Smarts, *Harvard Business Review*, 82 (9), 88-97.
- Lester, S. (1994) Management standards: a critical approach, *Competency* 2(1), 28-31.
- Levy, S. (1994) (ed.) *Louis Guttman on Theory and Methodology: Selected Writings*. Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Co.
- Loan-Clarke, J. (1996) The Management Charter Initiative: a critique of management standards/NVQs, *Journal of Management Development*, 15, 4-17.
- Marturano, A., Wood, M. and Gosling, J. (2005) *Toward a linguistic analysis of leadership*. Centre for Leadership Studies Working Paper, University of Exeter.
- Matlay, H. (1999) Employers' perceptions and implementation of S/NVQs in Britain: a critical overview, *International Journal of Training and Development*, 3, 132-141.
- McCall, M.W. (1998) *High Fliers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- McClelland, D. (1973) Testing for competence rather than intelligence, *American Psychologist*, 28, 1-14.
- MCI (1987) *National Occupational Standards in Management*. London: Management Charter Initiative.
- MCI (1997) *National Occupational Standards in Management*. London: Management Charter Initiative; available online at [<http://www.management-standards.org.uk>].

- Miller, L., Rankin, N. and Neathey, F. (2001) *Competency Frameworks in UK Organizations*. London: CIPD.
- Mintzberg, H. (1999) Managing quietly, *Leader to Leader*, Spring, 12.
- Mintzberg, H. (2004) *Managers Not MBAs*. London: FT Prentice Hall.
- NHS Leadership Centre (2003) *NHS Leadership Qualities Framework: Full Technical Research Paper*. London: NHS Leadership Centre; available online at [<http://www.nhsleadershipqualities.nhs.uk>].
- Price, T. (2003) The ethics of authentic transformational leadership, *Leadership Quarterly*, 14, 67-81.
- Pondy, L. R. (1978) Leadership is a language game. In M. McCall and M. Lonbardo (Eds), *Leadership: Where else do we go?* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 87-99.
- Raelin, J. (2003) *Creating Leaderful Organizations*. San Fransisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Rankin, N. (2002) Raising performance through people: the ninth competency survey, *Competency and Emotional Intelligence*, Jan, 2-21.
- Safty, A. (2003) Moral Leadership: Beyond management and governance, *Harvard International Review*, Fall, 84-89.
- Salaman, G. (2004) Competences of managers, competences of leaders. In J. Storey (ed.) *Leadership in Organizations: Current issues and key trends*. London: Routledge, 58-78.
- Sandberg, J. (2000) Understanding human competence at work: an interpretative approach, *Academy of Management Journal*, 43 (1), 9–25.
- Sparrow, P. (1997) Organisational competencies: creating a strategic behavioural framework for selection and assessment. In N. Anderson and P. Herriot (Eds) *International Handbook of Selection and Assessment*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Sparrow, P. (2002) To use competencies or not to use competencies? That is the question. In M. Pearn (Eds) *Individual Differences and Development in Organizations*, Chichester: John Wiley, pp107-129.
- Swales, S. and Roodhouse, S. (2003) Structural Barriers to the Take-up of Higher Level NVQs, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 55(1), 85-110.
- Wheatley, M. (2001) Restoring hope for the future through critical education of leaders, *Vimut Shiksha*, March. Available online at [<http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/restoringhope.html>].
- Winterton, J. and Winterton, R. (1997) Does Management Development Add Value? *British Journal of Management*, Vol.8 Special Issue, S65-S76.
- Wood, M. (2005) The fallacy of misplaced leadership, *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(6), 1101-1121.
- Zaleznik, A. (1977) Managers and leaders: Are they different? *Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 67-78.

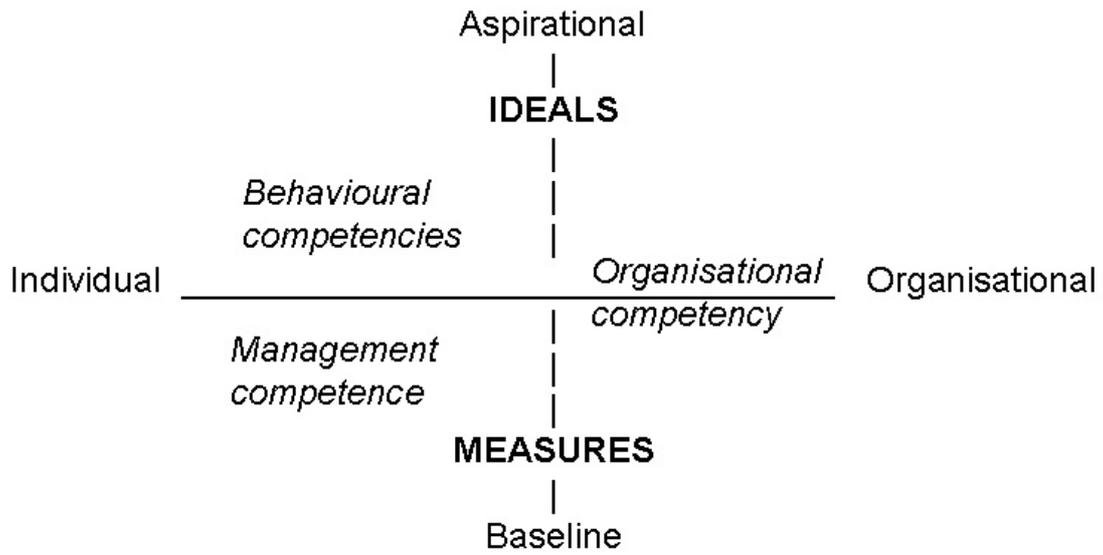


Figure 1 – Differing concepts of competencies

Word/theme	Number of reflective reports	Percent (a)	Number of competency frameworks	Percent (b)	Difference (a-b)
#reflect	30	78.90%	3	10.30%	68.60%
#follow*	26	68.40%	0	0%	68.40%
#moral	26	68.40%	2	6.90%	61.50%
#belief	28	73.70%	4	13.80%	59.90%
#trust	32	84.20%	8	27.60%	56.60%
courage	29	76.30%	6	20.70%	55.60%
#challenge	33	86.80%	10	34.50%	52.30%
humility	18	47.40%	1	3.50%	43.90%
#learn	32	84.20%	13	44.80%	39.40%
Work/life balance	17	44.70%	2	6.90%	37.80%
#honesty	21	55.30%	6	20.70%	34.60%
#intellect	21	55.30%	6	20.70%	34.60%
#Inspiration	24	63.20%	9	31.00%	32.20%
#empathy	15	38.50%	2	6.90%	31.60%
#confidence	25	65.80%	10	34.50%	31.30%
#Aware	24	63.20%	10	34.50%	28.70%
#emotion	16	42.10%	4	13.80%	28.30%
#Ethics	21	55.30%	8	27.60%	27.70%
#complexity	17	44.70%	5	17.20%	27.50%
#values	34	89.50%	18	62.10%	27.40%
#Vision	34	89.50%	18	62.10%	27.40%
integrity	26	68.40%	12	41.40%	27.00%
Diversity	18	47.40%	6	20.70%	26.70%
#Flexibility	20	52.60%	8	27.60%	25.00%
#intuition	11	28.20%	1	3.50%	24.70%
#adapt	16	42.10%	7	24.10%	18.00%
#listen	17	44.70%	8	27.60%	17.10%
change	33	86.80%	20	70.00%	16.80%
uncertainty	9	23.70%	2	6.90%	16.80%
#motivate	23	60.50%	13	44.80%	15.70%
#determination	13	34.20%	6	20.70%	13.50%
#influence	23	60.50%	14	48.30%	12.20%
#Communication	34	89.50%	23	79.30%	10.20%
#resilience	12	31.60%	7	24.10%	7.50%
Perseverance	3	7.90%	1	3.50%	4.40%
#develop	37	97.40%	27	93.10%	4.30%
others	33	86.80%	24	82.80%	4.00%
#decision	28	73.70%	21	72.40%	1.30%
TOTAL OBS.	38		29		

Table 1 – Comparison of themes from reflective reports and competency frameworks
(sorted by descending order of difference)

Note: # indicates that words with a common stem have been grouped
* only instances that refer to the process of followership