Article

Toward a New Curriculum of Leadership Competencies: Advances in Motivation Science Call for Rethinking Leadership Development

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Abstract

The Problem.

Leadership competencies are designed to equip leaders with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics, required to effectively lead people toward the achievement of organizational goals. However, advances in motivation science, specifically the development of self-determination theory, suggest that many current leadership competency models contain outdated approaches to motivation that undermine their intended purpose of leadership effectiveness.

The Solution.

New motivation leadership competencies grounded in self-determination theory are recommended to promote leadership behaviors that support people's psychological needs. These foundational competencies take advantage of compelling motivation research to provide a filtering mechanism for culling outdated competencies proven to undermine effective performance, but also provide the basis for congruent leadership skills that promote flourishing in the workplace.

The Stakeholders.

Human resource development (HRD) practitioners will benefit from the rationale and recommendations for introducing a new set of competencies based on self-determination theory into their leadership development efforts. While executives or leaders in the team and organizational contexts will appreciate the consideration of expanding or rethinking their own leader behaviors, the new competencies are most relevant for leaders of individual contributors in the one-to-one context.

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Employee development is one of the most time-honored and vital duties within human resources (HR) functions (McLagan, 1989). Competencies specify the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics, required for effective performance (Rodriguez, Patel, Bright, Gregory, & Gowing, 2002; Schippmann et al., 2000). Central to employee development, competencies are the basis for training curricula, performance standards and reviews, promotion criteria, and career planning. Beyond employee development, competencies also influence protocol and decision making for selection and hiring, compensation schemes, retention management, succession planning, and supporting organizational change.

While competencies affect employee development at all levels and within a variety of contexts, this article focuses on the competencies and skills a leader uses in the one-to-one leadership context to develop and guide individual staff members. Leadership in the one-to-one context presents the most intriguing opportunity for immediately and directly impacting employee performance, employee engagement and work passion, culture, and organizational results (Zigarmi, Fowler, & Lyles, 2007).

Scientific breakthroughs in understanding human motivation provide an impetus for rethinking the competencies required for leading in the one-to-one context. The purpose of this article is to recommend three new motivation competencies based on the unifying framework of self-determination theory (SDT). These foundational competencies are designed to promote leader behaviors that ensure people thrive while achieving organizational goals.

Genesis of Competencies

Providing the rationale for rethinking leadership competencies can best be appreciated by understanding how the current landscape of leadership competencies developed historically and the role motivation played in its evolution. Variations of four base leadership competencies established by Evers and colleagues, namely, managing self, communicating, managing people and tasks, and mobilizing innovation and change (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998), are widely accepted and are still relevant in today's workplace, with added consideration for global complexity and dynamic techno-social realities (Berdrow & Evers, 2014; Chalofsky, Rocco, & Morris, 2014).

Within the base leadership competencies, many of the specific leader actions and requisite skills for how to manage people and tasks were derived from turn-of-the-century thinking, such as those established in 1916 by Henri Fayol and his 14 principles of management, which was popularized in the early 1950s (Fayol & Storrs, 1949). Fayol's name may not be evoked today, but research on competencies currently in use shows that Fayol's ideas based on top-down, authoritarian, command and control

principles continue to influence modern concepts of management (Evers & Rush, 1996; Wren, Bedeian, & Breeze, 2002).

In addition to Fayol's influence, a variety of notable leadership theories have had a major influence over the competencies that dictate current leadership development strategies. A survey of top HR-related books and websites that guide management strategy and competencies for "motivating and bringing out the best in employees" cited six top leadership theories ("Popular Management Theories Decoded," 2017). They are Frederick Taylor's Scientific Theory (1856-1915), Fayol's Management Principles (1841-1925), Max Weber's Bureaucratic Theory (1864-1924), Elton Mayo's Human Relations Theory (1880-1949), Ludwig Von Bertalanffy's Systems Theory (1901-1972), and Douglas McGregor's X&Y Theory (1906-1964).

Four of the six leadership theories-in-use have a top-down, authority-based, command and control approach to leadership in common. An argument can be made that command and control leadership might be warranted when time is of the essence and risks are high (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Nelson, 1993). However, in general and over time, this leadership style has been shown ineffective for developing people (Bass & Bass, 2008), generating long-term or sustainable high performance (Gagne & Panaccio, 2014), or promoting people's health and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Except for McGregor, the most popular leadership theories influencing HR professionals also tend to be leader-centric rather than focused on employee needs. Competencies based on these leadership theories represent different assumptions and implications for motivating others, and, for the most part, consider employees' needs and the issue of motivation peripheral to leadership, rather than central or vital to effective leadership.

Existing side-by-side with leader-centric competencies, three motivation theories seem to have had the most influence on the development of leadership competencies (Reio & Batista, 2014). They are Skinner's Theory of Operant Conditioning (Skinner, 1938), McClelland's Human Motivation Theory (McClelland, 1985), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954).

B. F. Skinner's Theory of Operant Conditioning, sometimes referred to as managing with carrots and sticks, provides HR professionals and managers an easy way to legitimize the command and control approach to management (Skinner, 1938). Those who practice this theory assume that by controlling the consequences of an employee's behavior through rewards or punishment, they can shape an employee's behavior incrementally.

McClelland's Human Motivation Theory posits that every person is driven to satisfy the three needs for achievement, affiliation, or power (McClelland, 1985). Research has shown, for example, that a person exhibiting a strong need for power predicted successful leadership (McClelland & Broyatzis, 1982). Buoyed by such findings, and McClelland's role in competency development (McClelland, 1985), Human resource development (HRD) professionals embraced competencies focused on the strength of a leader's need for achievement and power.

At some point in their careers, most leaders have either consciously—or more likely, unwittingly—based (or justified) their approach to motivation on *Maslow's*

Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954). Maslow's idea that people are motivated by satisfying lower level needs such as food, water, shelter, and security, before they can move on to being motivated by higher level needs such as self-actualization, is probably the most well-known motivation theory in the world.

Potential Issues With Current Competency Models

Potential theoretical, operational, and pragmatic problems arise with competency models that mix and match various leadership models and motivation theories. Consider a common competency derived from Lominger's original 67 competencies (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2004) often found in a manager's performance plan:

> Drive for Results: Can be counted on to exceed goals successfully; is constantly and consistently one of the top performers; very bottom-line oriented; steadfastly pushes self and others for result. (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2004, p. 315)

This competency assumes that an effective leader has high needs for achievement and power, potentially reflecting McClelland's achievement theory. While McClelland's contributions to competency modeling are widely respected (McClelland & Broyatzis, 1982), more recent research finds that promoting leadership competencies based on McClelland's drive for achievement or power is just as likely to have negative consequences for performance and well-being—for both the leader and the people being led (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Leaders driven by needs for achievement, power, or affiliation are more likely to generate low-quality motivation in themselves and others that compromises short-term results and sabotages long-term results (Gagne, 2014).

Consider another competency derived from Lominger's original 67 competencies (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2004) often found side-by-side the competency to Drive for Results in a manger's performance plan:

> Motivating Others: Creates a climate in which people want to do their best; can motivate many kinds of direct reports and team or project members; can assess each person's hot button and use it to get the best out of him/her; pushes tasks and decisions down; empowers others; invites input from each person and shares ownership and visibility; makes each individual feel his/her work is important; is someone people like working for and with. (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2004, p. 219)

One way of interpreting hot buttons might be using carrots and sticks to motivate people, which reflects Skinner's operant conditioning approach which assumes a person in power can manipulate people's behavior through rewards and punishment.

Skinner's influence on competencies that promote authoritarian leadership models through external rewards (incentives, power, status, etc.) and punishment (pressure, fear, guilt) cannot be underestimated. Current motivation science provides compelling evidence that the tactics often used to drive for results thwart the type of motivation required to get those results (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Neither should we underestimate the potentially adverse effects these strategies have on productivity, creativity,

innovation, sustainable performance, and people's health and well-being. Current research is only beginning to illuminate the high price paid to drive results by trying to motivate people using carrots and sticks (e.g., Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

However, the Motivating Others competency could also be interpreted as taking people's needs into account by empowering them, inviting and sharing ownership and visibility, and making individuals feel their work is important. Maslow is often cited as the inspiration for competencies that tend to people's needs (Kremer & Hammond, 2013). While Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was an important contribution to the discussion of psychological needs, unfortunately, little to no empirical evidence exists to prove a hierarchy of motivational needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Regardless of whether a hierarchy exists, current motivation science has granted us a new way to understand psychological needs, and offers a promising alternative.

When it comes to building leadership competencies and requisite skills, not taking the breakthroughs in understanding human motivation into consideration can hurt—figuratively, by constraining proactive behavior, limiting productivity, stifling performance, diminishing creativity, inhibiting innovation, sabotaging results; and literally, by generating ill-being and mental and physical health issues in the workplace.

Recent motivation research makes a compelling case for alternatives to leadership competencies that drive for results and promote pushing oneself or others to get those results. A major strength of SDT is that it provides an empirically supported (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Gagne, 2014; Murayama et al., 2013) and field-tested framework for motivation (Fowler, 2014) that can be applied within the one-to-one context to promote high-quality motivation while producing desired organizational outcomes.

Advancing Leadership Development Based on SDT

This article proposes a two-step approach to guide HRD professionals for introducing new leadership competencies in the one-to-one context based on SDT. Specifically, they are as follows:

1. Familiarize leaders on the compelling empirical research and business implications of SDT.
2. Introduce three new motivation competencies to integrate SDT and the leadership behaviors required to achieve organizational results and promote employee flourishing.

Familiarize Leaders on SDT

SDT has found its way into mainstream literature over recent years (Fowler, 2014; Pink, 2011), yet has yet to influence the leadership competencies used to develop leaders or circumvent the integration of traditional theories such as Operant Conditioning, Achievement Motivation, or Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Adapting leadership competencies based on SDT requires HR professionals and organizational leaders to

understand SDT and appreciate its implications on organizational leadership—especially in the one-to-one context.

For example, SDT poses that the focus on motivation should shift from the *quantity* of motivation a person has for a goal to the *quality* of their motivation. Some motivation is low-quality and suboptimal. Some motivation is high-quality and optimal. SDT provides a solid body of empirical evidence demonstrating the implications for emphasizing the quality of a person's motivation (e.g., Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Low-quality motivation thwarts optimal functioning resulting in short-term, sporadic performance that does not support well-being. High-quality motivation promotes optimal functioning that leads to productive performance and individual long-term health and flourishing. If leaders understand that their job is to help people experience high-quality motivation, they might be less likely to depend on external rewards to stimulate action and more likely to focus on helping people experience a sense of autonomy and meaning related to the goal.

Leaders need to be educated on how to nurture people's optimal motivation through their satisfaction of three basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (ARC; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002). These psychological needs are foundational for all human beings to thrive and flourish, are empirically validated, universal, and, when satisfied, result in high-quality motivation (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2017). Understanding people's psychological needs for ARC and the implications associated with supporting or thwarting these needs provide the key for reshaping leadership competencies. Leaders can help people satisfy people's psychological needs through their behaviors, but they can also erode them (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

Autonomy is a person's need to perceive that they have choices, that what they are doing is of their own volition, and that they are the source of their own actions (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Leaders erode a person's sense of autonomy by using controlling language, imposing goals and metrics, depending on rewards and incentives to manipulate behavior, micromanaging, and applying pressure (Hardré & Reeve, 2009).

Relatedness is a person's need to care about and be cared about by others, to feel connected to others without concerns about ulterior motives, and to feel that they are contributing to something greater than themselves (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Leaders erode a person's sense of relatedness by failing to provide rationale for work, promoting metrics without meaning, ignoring feelings, and generating isolation through lack of justice and transparency (Fowler, 2014).

Competence is a person's need to feel effective at meeting everyday challenges and opportunities, demonstrating skill over time, and feeling a sense of growth and flourishing (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Leaders erode a person's sense of competence by focusing on performance outcomes at the expense of learning outcomes, punishing mistakes, and failing to provide appropriate direction and support (Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack, & Zumbo, 2013).

Introduce Three New Motivation Competencies

The good news is that HRD professionals can support employees' psychological needs for ARC by teaching leaders in the one-to-one context a specific set of skills (Hardré & Reeve, 2009) and ways to adapt traditional behaviors, such as goal setting, to be more ARC supportive (Fowler, 2014). This article recommends leadership competencies that support people's psychological needs with the intention of nurturing a workplace environment where people are more likely to shift their motivational outlook from suboptimal motivation to optimal motivation and experience high-quality motivation.

Three competencies that integrate SDT are proposed to HRD professionals to help leaders achieve organizational results while fueling employee work passion and the inherent benefits that come from actively engaged individuals at work (Shuck, Roberts, & Zigarmi, 2018; Thibault-Landry, Egan, Crevier-Braud, Manganelli & Forest, 2018). They are (a) Encourage Autonomy, (b) Deepen Relatedness, and (c) Build Competence.

HRD professionals should consider these motivation competencies as foundational—meaning they influence leadership behaviors across contexts and categories of competencies.

Definition and Requisite Skills to Encourage Autonomy

The competency of encouraging autonomy is defined as the leader's ability to help people perceive that they have choices, that what they are doing is of their own volition, and that they are the source of their own actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Instead of applying pressure, demanding accountability, and incentivizing or manipulating behavior, this competency includes skills where leaders

1. use noncontrolling language that invites a perception of choice,
2. illuminate boundaries, then explore choices within those boundaries,
3. collaboratively set goals and help reframe goals as relevant, and
4. present goals and timelines as valuable information necessary for achieving agreed-upon outcomes.

Autonomy does not equate to freedom. Autonomy is a person's perception of choice and sense of control or volition, regardless of whether they have the freedom to act—it is their internalization of their circumstances that determines their experience of autonomy. Many roles demand strict adherence to rules, regulations, and process. The way those limits are communicated can facilitate the employee's internal frame of reference toward or away from perceived autonomy.

Example 1

- Avoid establishing boundaries in a way that erodes autonomy, such as "When selling our pharmaceutical product, you must adhere to strict FDA guidelines including (state guidelines). If you go outside the bounds of these guidelines, you face immediate termination."

- Instead, illuminate boundaries and explore choices within those boundaries: "When selling this product, there are strict FDA guidelines including (state guidelines). You need to stay within these boundaries to protect your client, yourself, our company, and most importantly, the patient who is prescribed the drug. Within these limits, however, you still have the freedom to make choices and decisions that will affect your client relationships, the quality of your proposals, and the effectiveness of your efforts. Let's talk about the choices you have that might influence how you approach selling this product."

Encouraging autonomy requires communicating workplace requirements and performance feedback as data or information which the employee needs to be successful, without generating feelings of being controlled by pressure, fear, guilt, shame, power, status, or tangible and intangible external rewards.

Example 2

- Avoid communicating deadlines in a way that erodes autonomy: "You must submit the team's report no later than July 20."
- Instead, communicate a deadline as a valuable information that encourages autonomy: "Our project needs to be completed by July 20, so the CFO has time to review it prior to the Board meeting on August 15. This spreadsheet proposes a project timeline, so each team member understands their role and can schedule their contributions appropriately. I propose that Joe have data compiled by April 1; that Sally's analysis be completed by May 15; and that I have conclusions completed by June 15. This schedule gives you between June 15 and July 20 to generate the report, so the CFO has time to present it at the Board meeting on August 15. Do you foresee any steps I haven't included in this proposal? Are there challenges I haven't considered, that might influence this timeline or your ability to complete the report by July 20?"

Definition and Requisite Skills to Deepen Relatedness

The competency to deepen relatedness is defined as the leader's ability to help people to care about and feel cared about by others, to feel connected to others without concerns about ulterior motives, and to feel that they are contributing to something greater than themselves (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Instead of leadership models that tend to focus on metrics without an effort to help people derive meaning, drive for results without awareness of people's personal concerns, or push outcomes without regard for interpersonal relationships, this competency includes skills where leaders

1. demonstrate empathy and caring through listening, acknowledging, and accepting expressions of negative affect;
2. offer pure and informational feedback rather than personal or evaluative praising;

3. provide rationale, share information about yourself and the organization, and discuss your intentions openly;
4. help individuals align work and tasks with their own developed values and work-related purpose; and
5. frame actions in terms of the welfare of the whole and focus on contributions to the greater good.

Deepening relatedness requires deep listening combined with acceptance that the negative affect and sentiments expressed by an employee are potentially valid reactions to a difficult or unappealing situation.

Example 1

- Avoid downplaying or diminishing emotions: "You shouldn't feel that way. Everyone has failed at one time or another. You just need to work harder next time."
- Instead, provide an opportunity for the individual to acknowledge emotions: "It seems you might be wrestling with this right now. If that's true, I hope you feel comfortable using me as a sounding board. Talking through what happened and what you're experiencing might enable you to make sense of it or even come to peace with it."

Deepening relatedness also requires a high degree of self-regulation by the leader to stay focused on the employee's needs for expression rather than their own—including the leader's need to praise someone. Praising often says more about the leader's need than the need of the receiver.

Example 2

- Avoid giving personal and evaluative feedback that erodes relatedness which may result in momentary good feelings for the person receiving your positive opinion, but also increases the risk of the receiver being dependent on external positive evaluation rather than their own internal state of being: "You made me happy when . . . ; I was so glad that you . . . ; I'm so proud of you."
- Instead, provide pure and informational feedback that deepens relatedness: "One of your goals for this project was to break down silos within the company and gain participation from a variety of departments. I noticed that you received endorsements from three departments on the report you generated. How do you feel about your effort and the outcome?"

Definition and Requisite Skills to Build Competence

The competency of building competence is defined as the leader's ability to help people feel effective at meeting everyday challenges and opportunities, help people demonstrate skill over time, and help people appreciate their growth and learning (Deci &

Ryan, 2000). Instead of discounting training, punishing mistakes, and focusing on results over effort, this competency includes skills where leaders

1. emphasize learning goals, not just performance goals,
2. ask, "What did you learn today?" Recognize mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow,
3. provide training and appropriate leadership style for the person's level of development,
4. facilitate problem solving by asking questions to explore options and alternative strategies, and
5. establish norms for individuals requesting feedback instead of having them wait to receive the feedback they need to learn and grow.

Building a person's sense of competence requires the leader to understand that in the beginning, everyone is a learner with needs for the high direction that provides structure, guidance, and specific how-to's. But, as an employee's experience, competence, and commitment develop over time, a leader must exercise flexibility to provide the appropriate amount of direction and support—while still encouraging growth and learning.

Example 1

- Avoid giving empty feedback that doesn't build a person's competence: "I'm happy to see that you met your goal in time."
- Instead, highlight progress that builds their competence: "I appreciate the update on your progress. Let's discuss what you might have done differently in hindsight, what you did that worked, and what you learned that will help you on similar goals in the future."

Micromanaging means providing too much direction to someone who has demonstrated competence. If someone has competence, but their performance is suffering due to lost commitment, overdirection further erodes their commitment and performance. However, failing to provide enough direction to someone with low competence erodes their sense of competence—retarding their performance even further.

Example 2

- Avoid micromanaging someone who has demonstrated competence in the past: "It appears that the beta test failed to meet the required standards. I've outlined what you need to do differently. You've got one more try or we risk losing our funding."
- Instead, with someone who has demonstrated competence in the past, provide an opportunity to problem solve in a way that builds competence: "Given the results of the beta test and the demanding timelines to meet standard requirements, let's explore your options for the next beta test, and discuss what you need and how I can help you get where you need to go."

General Questions to Support ARC

Leaders are used to asking about progress on a goal, but can support people's ARC by asking goal-related or general questions to stimulate a person's experience of ARC. For example, asking people about their daily or weekly choices reminds them they have choices—and encourages autonomy. Asking questions to explore values in use or meaning derived through their work helps deepen relatedness. Asking questions about what has been learned builds competence. Regardless of the goal or situation, leaders can ask questions on a regular basis, in almost any circumstance, to support people's ARC.

Autonomy. Remind people that they are making choices every day.

- You may feel that this task, goal, or situation was imposed on you. In the face of strong external pressure, rules, or control, what options can you identify that might help relieve the pressure and provide you with some sense of control over the situation?
- Are you feeling pressured when you think about the task, goal, or situation? Where is the pressure coming from? Why do you think that is?
- How do you feel about the choices you made this week? What choices did you make that you wish you had not? Why? What choices did you make that you are glad you did? Why?

Relatedness. Heighten people's awareness of meaning and contribution.

- As you think about this goal, how does it align with your values or work-related purpose?
- What happened this week that reminds you of the contribution you make to others through your work?
- What did you find meaningful in your work this week?

Competence. Remind people of their inherent joy for learning and build competence by asking more than "What did you achieve today?"

- As you think of your week, what did you learn that might help you in the future?
- How might your learning from this situation be helpful to someone else?
- What new skills will you develop as you pursue this goal?

Questions that facilitate people's internal frame of ARC encourage self-regulation by promoting mindfulness, a nonjudgmental state of awareness that enables one to recognize options and alternatives (Brown, Creswell, & Ryan, 2015). The health benefits of mindfulness are widely accepted (Langer, 1989), but neuroscience also shows a significant correlation between mindfulness and creativity, empathy with others, and a direct experience of ARC (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Acting on a New Paradigm May Require Exploring Old Beliefs

Supporting people's psychological needs directly impacts how leaders approach employee development and performance, but it is also a key strategic advantage. A quick search of the top issues keeping executives awake at night include innovation to stay ahead of forced disruption and competition, optimizing employee productivity, employee engagement, virtual management, team member excellence, and workload and life balance (e.g., Moritz, 2017; "19th Annual Global CEO Survey," 2016). These issues require an optimally motivated workforce. But, leaders operating on outdated beliefs about motivation may continue to depend on outdated approaches that are ineffective at mobilizing that workforce.

Educating leaders on the empirical evidence and proven benefits of SDT is a good first step. But, leaders may be reluctant to trade in their carrots and sticks if they do not have the skills to replace them. Teaching leaders the skills necessary to encourage autonomy, deepen relatedness, and build competence through their one-to-one leadership is essential.

However, some leaders may need more than education and training to shift from "What can I do to motivate people?" or "What can I give people to motivate them?" to a new set of motivation competencies based on "How do I facilitate people's satisfaction of autonomy, relatedness, and competence?" Leaders may find it difficult to accept that the way they drive for results can have a deleterious effect on getting results.

Perhaps the most daunting, yet rewarding role an HRD professional can undertake is guiding leaders through an investigation of deeply embedded beliefs and programmed values such as, "It's not personal, it's just business," or "The purpose of an organization is to make a profit." Championing new foundational motivation competencies may require helping leaders explore outdated beliefs that perpetuate ineffective leadership practices and prevent full acceptance of a new and different approach to developing people and generating results.

Reframing leadership competencies based on encouraging autonomy, deepening relatedness, and building competence means helping leaders shift their focus from what they want *from* people to what they want *for* people. Focusing on what leaders want *for* people means creating a workplace environment based on foundational ARC-supportive competencies where people produce results and sustain high performance because they are flourishing and experiencing high-quality optimal motivation.

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