

Five Levels of Leadership Competence

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Most organizational successes, as well as failures, have their roots in a single common denominator. This is not to say that there aren't many variables involved including the efforts of many employees, but there is one consistent element at the core of all organizational activity, and performance shortcomings in particular. While on the surface many problems seem due to product deficiencies, poor service levels, inefficient processes, outdated systems, or failed projects, these issues stem from a more fundamental issue. A company's poor profitability, lack of sales, or operational inefficiency is ultimately rooted in poor leadership. Organizational shortcomings, as well as capabilities, have leadership to blame or credit.

Like it or not, an organization's leadership influences everything an organization does, either through commission or omission. Even intangibles such as culture and values can be traced to what an organization's leadership does to set the example or allow to persist. An organization's leadership is responsible for developing, approving, or allowing every organizational activity including strategies, budgets, plans, systems, and processes. Leaders make decisions to take action or defer action, whether related to building, buying, partnering, engaging, or disengaging. Leaders, while not the only ones who are critical to an organization's performance, are ultimately responsible for the outcomes—good or bad.

You might argue that a company's frontline employees, streamlined processes, embedded systems, innovative products, or marketing programs are the most critical components and sources of competitive differentiation, but employees, processes, systems, and strategies are ultimately formulated, influenced, or decided upon by leaders. For this reason, an organization's leadership competence is its primary determinate of performance.

The question regarding an organization's capabilities at its core can then be stated as "What are our required leadership competencies and how well do we embody them?" As an executive coach, I've had the opportunity to analyze leadership in great detail from an insider's perspective. Having coached hundreds of executives and observed firsthand how competencies correlate to results, I've discovered a recurring set of competencies in successful leaders as well as the competencies missing in unsuccessful ones. In all, I've identified thirty-eight competencies of great leadership that fit into five categories. The five categories spell out the acronym SCOPE:

- **Self: Setting the Example** – At the core of great leadership is *intrapersonal* competence. This is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable leaders to lead themselves and set the positive example for others to follow. People who can't develop and lead themselves can't effectively lead others. Competencies such as passion, self-awareness, integrity, mental fitness, courage, and confidence form the foundation of great leadership and the ability to gain other people's trust.
- **Communications: Inspiring Performance** – Second only to leaders' ability to set a positive example for others to follow is their *interpersonal* competence and ability to communicate. Communications is the vehicle through which leaders perform their work. Great leadership requires competencies such as articulating the "why", developing compelling content, engaging audiences, and listening attentively. People can be competent in their knowledge, but if they can't communicate it well and inspire others to follow, their knowledge is of little value.
- **Others: Developing People** – Great leaders attract and develop top talent. They hire well and develop their people continuously. They have the competencies of attracting, selecting, coaching, enabling, encouraging, managing, and imparting ownership. They don't simply hire people and set objectives. They don't merely expect people to perform and then fire them when they don't. Great leaders coach their people as great athletic coaches coach their athletes. They help people leverage their capabilities and overcome their shortcomings.

- **Partnerships: Leveraging Teamwork** – Having a team of top-performing individuals is insufficient to reaching the highest levels of performance. Great leaders assimilate people into teams that offset each other's weaknesses and leverage each other's capabilities. They have the competencies of alignment, building community, managing conflict, and collaboration. They work cross-functionally as well as with outside organizations to build teams of diverse people who work together toward common goals.
- **Execution: Delivering Excellence** – Leadership is a means, not an end goal itself. The end goal of great leadership is to deliver results. Great leaders execute and sustain top-performance quarter after quarter, year after year. They have the competencies of focusing on value, enabling speed, fostering innovation, and making great decisions. They don't rely on organizational restructuring or other actions that merely cover-up inherent operational issues. They build an organic capability that produces great results consistently.

There are many competencies, thirty-eight in all, that great leaders possess. One of the most important is the ability to coach people in their ongoing professional development. Studies find that ongoing employee development is more impactful to an organization's performance than hiring the right people to begin with. Like a sports team, it is important to have the right people on the team, but it is even more important to develop people continually and assimilate them into a cohesive team.



Being a fan of sports and a former athlete myself, I find close parallels between great leaders and great athletic coaches. They both manifest these five categories of leadership competence. From a different perspective, there are another five characteristics they focus on. No matter what sport you might think of, there are five qualities that great athletic coaches give their attention to. They focus on technique, equipment, mental fitness, physical fitness, and teamwork. These are the five qualities that the thirty-eight competencies are intended to capitalize on. These five qualities apply as much to industry as they do to sports. Top performing employees cultivate the techniques and skills required for their role. They have the enabling resources and equipment they need. They have a positive can-do attitude. They are healthy, having the

physical ability and endurance their role requires. They are part of an interdependent group of people who work together for the common good of the team.

Enabling these five qualities through the five categories of leadership competence is the content of my SCOPE of Leadership six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.scopeofleadership.com). Read Book 1 to learn the fundamentals of learning to lead. Read Book 2 to build the competencies of leading self and setting the example. Read Book 3 to discover the art of effective communications and inspiring others. Read Book 4 to learn how to coach and exhort people in their ongoing professional development. Read Book 5 to build high-performance teams and leverage the synergy of teamwork. Read Book 6 to put it all together and create a streamlined operation that delivers great results consistently.

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