Are Competencies Enough?
As we try to identify good coaches and ensure some quality control, are competencies enough asks Dr Carmelina Lawton Smith of Oxford Brookes University Business School.

How would you recognise a good coach? This is the challenge that so many individuals and organisations wrestle with in identifying the right coach to employ. Often the approach is based on little more than trial and error, selecting someone that seems to have the right track record and experience. Yet we know that knowledge and experience in a particular field may be a very poor reflection of coaching expertise and can in fact hinder the sort of challenge required. Knowledge of an industry can generate collusion and a consultancy mentality not always indicative of effective coaching.

Frequently, the contact is initiated by personal recommendation, but we know that rapport and matching can be important considerations to create an effective coaching relationship (De Haan, 2008), so a good coach for one person may not prove a good coach for someone else. Authors recommend the value of a 'chemistry' meeting in helping select the right coach (Jarvis, 2004) but Wycherley and Cox (2008) highlight that this seems a 'rather limited and imprecise' way of selecting a suitable coach. They conclude that 'there are benefits from focusing on the objective selection of coaches using robust standards and criteria, rather than relying on surface or deep diversity factors or subjective matching approaches based on initial rapport' (p49).

In an effort to provide these 'robust standards and criteria', a number of professional bodies have produced competency frameworks. For example, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council has published a competency framework as part of its 'quest to develop our profession, to promote good practice and to educate and enable clients of coaching and mentoring to demand good practice' (EMCC UK). Such frameworks 'speak the language' of organisations and attempt to define the key competencies required of coaches to demonstrate their expertise as a coach. But is this enough? Can a list of competencies ensure the quality of the coach, and if not, what is the point of them?

Competency frameworks can be very valuable in defining the core learning agenda that might drive initial qualification or entry to the profession. It allows a benchmark to be set as a minimum requirement, but may prove less effective at assessing quality and predicting future effectiveness in a context as diverse as coaching.

There are a number of issues with the application of competency frameworks in the coaching context.

The diversity apparent in coaching makes it hard to be definitive about which list of competencies is most appropriate. We know that more than one list of potential competencies can be effective (Bono et al., 2009). If alternative accreditation frameworks are equally valuable, then none may reflect a set of core competencies required in coaching. In addition, De Haan et al. (2011) identified that the behaviours that clients found 'most helpful' were listening, understanding and encouragement, so it may be possible for an effective coaching relationship to exist based on these alone, without the need for any additional competencies. Coaching approaches such as 'The Thinking Environment' (Kline, 2009) can prove effective despite demonstrating very few of the expected competencies and Griffiths and Campbell (2008) also found when evaluating the

ICF core competencies that there were a number of anomalies and overlaps. Such variability in competency lists may reflect the view that different contexts require different approaches and support Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) who suggest that assessing the competent coach relies on knowing 'effective for what'. Such issues raise questions about the value and use of such competencies to assess quality and predict future performance.

Many authors highlight that the effective coach is far more than 'a set of skills and techniques' (Wang, 2013), as might be implied by competencies. In fact, the more experienced the coach, frequently the less reliant they become on established tools and techniques. Their experience brings a confidence of approach that often results in greater risk taking and more innovation in dealing with assignments. Coaching competencies are necessarily backward-looking: they define behaviours and activities that were successful in the past so may prove to be less useful in fast changing environment where innovation and creativity is required. The most challenging coaching assignments may well see an experienced coach adopt novel and innovative strategies that are not reflected in competency frameworks. As Drake (2011) notes, 'many of these competencies seems less useful for assessing and developing people at more advanced levels'. One might then question how effective a list of competencies can be in identifying the best coaches.

The coaching context also brings additional complications. Garvey notes that "competency frameworks and standards carry with them assumptions of control, simplification, reductionism, predictability and compliance" (2011, p.63). But in such a complex field this predictability may not be assured by selecting a coach based on adherence to a set of competencies. Organisations may therefore use a competency based assessment as an indication of quality assurance that may not be justified. This has led Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) to question 'whether such frameworks are fit for purpose' and to highlight that the complexity and unpredictability of coaching may need a new model of assessment. They suggest a model which builds on the competency frameworks with a set of 'capabilities'.

> *'A capabilities approach…. is explicit in appreciation of the diversity of coaching styles in contrast to excessive universality of competencies that aim for predictability of the coaching process. A capabilities approach implies an approach to coach training and education that allows the development of the coach in congruence with the individual's characteristics and values, who they are a person and not only as an opportunity to assimilate a repertoire of competencies.' (p131)*

We might therefore argue that at this point, competencies are not enough to select and identify the best coaches with certainty and predictability. Lists of competencies have made a significant contribution to the development of coaching but may now be in need of review to take us forward.

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