

Are Out-of-the-Box Assessments Worth It?

May Be Time for an HR Attitude Adjustment

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Some years back I was involved with a large manufacturing company that had a relatively poor safety record and wanted to do something about it.

It began by recruiting a new safety director with a proven track record in implementing and maintaining best-practice safety programs. The company's HR found someone who had an impressive 20+ years of success in an industry known for world-class safety. He was hired and he failed miserably.

Why did this happen? This guy had a 20-year track record and a treasure trove of impressive results to show for it.

The problem was he had gained his successes in an industry which has a history of very well-developed and successful safety programs. He was accustomed to employees who understand the value of safety programs and are fully engaged in the process. But not all manufacturing firms share this history. In many cases, line managers don't understand why a safety program is important.

The new safety director, who was very competent at implementing programs with employees who already knew what to do and valued safety, lacked an ability to spearhead a change in his new company's core values.

Rather than basing the hiring decision solely on the person's impressive track record in safety, the company would have been much further ahead if it had looked for someone with experience in change management, organizational culture, training and development, and related competencies.



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Stories like this happen every day because companies traditionally hire people based on their past experiences.

But competencies, not experiences, are the critical predictors of success. A competency describes successful performance in terms of observable behaviors. Experiences can tell you what a person did and what they achieved — and these are indeed important — but experience alone cannot tell you *how* they succeeded.

Competencies describe performance in terms of how it was achieved and under what circumstances. As such, they are most useful when described in a way that is specific to a particular position, organization, and situation.

The fact that different competencies are required for success in different companies explains why an individual may be successful in one job but fail in a new, seemingly similar job in a different organization.

Different situations present different challenges that require different competencies. Sure, our safety director knew all about safety, but he did not know anything about change management. He was not prepared for the challenges of the new job.

360-degree reviews are the best way to measure competencies because they provide feedback on the specific, observable behaviors associated with successful performance.

To meet the growing demand for these reviews, many companies are releasing convenient, out-of-the-box competency assessments.

While some are good, in the sense that they are based on the best research available on effective leadership, it is important to keep in mind that these surveys compare general leadership competencies of your employees

with people holding a wide range of jobs in other organizations. They do not necessarily reflect the unique challenges your employees face in your company.

Specific Questions are Key

Also, many out-of-the-box surveys don't describe behaviors sufficiently. If a survey asks two employees whether their manager is an "effective team player," one may say yes, because the manager offers to take meeting minutes, but another may say no, because that person has a habit of interrupting.

A more tailored survey boils down the performance of "effective team player" with

specific behaviors such as "Regularly attends plant-level safety meetings."

Specific descriptions of this nature tend to be more useful when they are tailored to the circumstances of a particular position in a particular organization.

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The companies that are implementing the best 360-degree reviews are those who are building custom competency-based surveys. To do this, they look at the kinds of challenges the person being evaluated faces and then find someone in the company who is successful in these situations. They study the successful employee. Through interviews with people who regularly interact with this person, they distil the behaviors that are most associated with success. There is strong research to support the value of such an approach.

When getting started, it may be useful to engage a trained professional to help identify the key competencies and associated behaviors. Eventually, internal resources can be developed to do this work, but it is important that employees first learn the analytical techniques. They are not difficult, but they are important. A poorly designed assessment can lead to performance, morale and even legal troubles.

Shift to Competency-Based HR

For example, I have a client for whom I completed the competency models for the CEO and COO. I am now coaching the HR director to create models for the other executives.

Working together, we assure a quality result and develop internal competency to do this work. Soon the HR Director will begin creating competency models for all other management and non-management positions on his own.

The beauty of this approach is that once you create a competency-model for a particular position, it can be incorporated into the job

description and form the basis for future hiring. It can also be used to assess current employees and as the basis for professional training and development.

An out-of-the-box assessment can be attractive in that it seems quicker and cheaper, but it is only useful if the results are relevant and actionable for your employees.

Although customized assessments may involve more investment upfront, they are the starting point for implementing behavior-based HR and can have significant, measurable return-on-investment.

If your goal is to improve performance, isn't it worth the investment to do it right?

D. Kerry Laycock has 23 years of experience as a certified management and organizational consultant. Over the years, he has been involved in a wide range of large-scale change initiatives, operational assessments, and the design and presentation of training. A primary focus of his work in recent years has been the design and implementation of competency-based employee selection, assessment, and development processes for business and government clients. For more information visit www.dklaycock.com.

Mr. Laycock uses Blue to deliver custom competency-based surveys for 360-degree reviews, performance evaluation, and employee feedback projects. This partnership allows eXplorance to combine the best technology with custom content for its clients.