

Implementing the Competencies

Step 1: Get the Competencies List Approved

The first step to implementation is to get approval of the competencies list that the task force has created from whatever groups or bodies were identified in chapter 2, step 4. The list should be sent to each group with a brief letter of introduction, including the purpose statement, a description of the process so far, and the task force's plans for implementation, including assessment and training. Some groups may suggest changes. After all the hard work the task force has put in, it may be difficult to hear newcomers' suggested revisions. These newcomers have a unique view of the library and the staff, however, and may see things the members of the task force did not. In some cases, the task force may even be required to adopt changes recommended by a group or individual. Keep an open mind and remember—one addition or subtraction will not ruin the competencies list. You are concerned with the overall project, and at this point, what you have created is a highly valuable tool for the library. That's what matters!

Step 2: Decide on Incentives

For some staff members, the incentive of learning is enough. Most people, however, require some additional incentive. Check to find out if competency training can be counted toward continuing education credits (CECs) for those positions that require CECs for ongoing accreditation or employment. The library also should consider other incentives for staff to meet competency standards and attend training sessions.

Libraries should seriously consider tying the meeting of competency standards to opportunities for promotion

or pay increases. I know, I know—you're thinking either a) the staff would fight that tooth and nail, or b) we don't have opportunities for promotion in our library; upward mobility doesn't exist, or c) we have no control over our pay scale—it's all controlled by the city/university/county/corporation/hospital. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to raise this possibility for those of us working in libraries where promotions or pay raises could be based in part on meeting or exceeding standards for technology competencies, particularly for those positions in the more technical fields. In addition, check with the employee union—it may or may not have something to say on this issue.

Evaluation criteria and rewards including compensation need to be adjusted to reflect core competencies.

Beth McNeil and Joan Giesecke, "Core Competencies for Libraries and Library Staff"¹

The idea "skills = dollars" is not new to the corporate world. Toyota instituted development plans so that employees who were willing to be trained and learn new skills would be rewarded with pay increases.² In that case, employees were rewarded for learning—not for having the most skills, but for being willing to gain new skills in the workplace. Wouldn't it be fabulous if the person in charge at your library could say to each employee, "If you complete the training program that is recommended based on your competency gaps, a quick unscheduled bump up to the next pay step will be the reward"? Do you think that would motivate employees to be trained and to learn? I do!

In the nonprofit, financially prudish world of libraries, a slightly more fiscally probable option is to offer prizes to

individuals, groups, work units, or branches that complete the most training, meet the highest level of competency standards, show the most improvement, or score highest on self-assessments after the training cycle has been completed. You could also make the awards more equitable and simply give every employee a prize for completing a certain program. One option would be to give each employee some sort of device or item related to the training topics. For example, under the Learning 2.0 Initiative at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County, each employee who completed the training program received an MP3 player. A laptop and PDA were also raffled off to participants.³

Another option would be to offer a half-day holiday (paid time off) to people who complete or work through various parts of the program. For example, you might decide that for every three training sessions an employee attended (or every five hours of training), he or she would get two hours of paid holiday time. People value their time above all else, and if you give them the opportunity to grab more of their personal time back, they will be happy to do what it takes to get there.

Incentives must be provided to encourage updating of selected competencies that are critical for the success of the library. These must include merit raises and/or promotions for those who succeed in changing and becoming technologically adept. Conversely, demotions or outright dismissal should be the consequence for those who fail to become technologically competent.

Anne Woodsworth, "New Library Competencies"⁴

No matter how you decide to reward employees for participation, success, and completion of the competency program, some kind of reward or incentive should be given. I guarantee that it will increase the impact and success rate of the program dramatically.

Step 3: Decide on Negative Consequences

One of the toughest elements of any competency training program is coping with the few staff members who do not meet competency standards even after ample training and retraining. As much as trainers would like to believe otherwise, there is such a thing as an untrainable person, at least on some topics. What should the trainer do? What should the supervisor do? What should the library do?

If the library administration sets a deadline by which all staff members needed to meet the competency stan-

dards, if that deadline has come and gone, and if reassessments show that certain people do not meet competency standards despite training, the library administration could be left in a tough position. Staff members need to be accountable, and we know that positive rewards work better than negative consequences. If competency standards are not met after a reasonable amount of time, though, there needs to be some negative consequence. If staff members don't have the minimum competencies required to do the job, then others suffer, including other library workers. In addition, the image of the library is hurt—and most important, so are the customers.

If a staff member does not meet competency standards, the first step is to determine the cause. Is it due to a lack of training because not enough training sessions were available? Is it due to a lack of training because the employee resists or refuses to be trained? Or is it due to the staff member having attended trainings, perhaps more than once, but not retaining the information? Stone and Sachs also recommend asking if the employee's poor performance and attitude are unusual, especially if he or she is a seasoned worker.⁵

If there were not enough training sessions available, then the employee's failure to meet competency standards is the responsibility of those in the administration of the library, not of the employee. In such a case, the employee should not be penalized. If, however, the employee has refused training, or has taken training and not retained the information, then those in the library administration need to deal with that employee's bad performance.

If a staff member refuses to be trained or is unable to retain the information, there are several options for negative consequences that the library's management should consider, in order of increasing severity:

- negative comments in the employee's evaluation
- decrease in pay step until competency standards are reached
- position reconfiguration
- transfer
- demotion
- termination

The decision to implement any one of these options will not be easy, especially if an employee seems to want to learn but is for some reason unable to retain the information. These cases are not all clear-cut. I can recall three employees who were, generally speaking, very good at their jobs but did not have most of the technology skills required for their positions. After competency assessment and multiple training sessions, these employees still could not retain and apply the information. As a result, customer service was uneven and poor, and other employees in the same job classification had to step in to do parts of these employees' jobs for them. In one case, the library opted

for negative comments; in the second, a transfer/demotion; and in the third, absolutely no consequences. Why the variation in response? Much had to do with the different attitudes and values of the management staff and supervisors responsible for the employees.

Figuring out the management's reaction ahead of time in such cases will help avoid such uneven application of consequences. Consistency on these issues is essential—across the board in different departments and locations—and management and supervisory staff may want to meet to iron out all of these eventualities, perhaps even before the competency standards are introduced. Staff members need to be well informed of the consequences of “choosing” not to meet the competency standards that everyone else in their positions are required to meet.

In any case, if you find yourself supervising an employee who does not meet the competency standards, the best thing for you to do is to stay positive. Look toward the future, set realistic and attainable short-term goals for the employee, and have rewards for his or her successes, how ever small they may seem to you (because they will seem much larger to the employee). Review the employee's performance regularly, and keep lines of communication open between the two of you on how to better this person's technology competencies. I believe that the bulk of employees will respond positively to encouraging behavior, and only a few will respond well to threats. Nevertheless, once the library has decided on negative consequences, those consequences will have to be applied evenly to all staff members, regardless of how much you like a person or of age, gender, proximity to retirement, how well the person does other parts of the job, or any other factors.

Step 4: Present the Competencies List to Staff

If you have chosen a combination format, you may be presenting the competencies list and the assessment at the same time, or you may present the competencies list alone at first. In either case, this is a crucial step. If you do not achieve staff buy-in at all levels, the creation of the competencies list may have little impact on the workplace. Hopefully, you have taken the advice given in preceding chapters, asking staff members for their input and keeping them involved at all steps in the process. Having done so will make presenting the competencies list much easier at this point. The task force may want to consider having a kick-off party for the competencies list, including food, music, and a hands-on technology “petting zoo,” in which staff members can experiment with all of the technologies they will be expected to use and understand. A simpler approach is to write a letter similar to the one the task force wrote to groups that needed to approve the competencies

list, reiterating the purpose of the competency standards and explaining what is going to happen next. This letter, along with the competencies list, can be distributed to staff members through e-mail, in a staff newsletter, or even as hard copy.

Below are some additional tips for getting staff buy-in during the presentation of the competencies list:

- Be excited about the project, and show that excitement when discussing the project with staff.
- Emphasize the incentives.
- Reassure staff members. Tell them not to worry if there are competencies in their area that they don't have yet. Let them know that training is on its way. Emphasize that having the competencies is a goal for the future, not an expectation of all staff members at this moment.
- Use words like *opportunity*, *exciting*, *transformation*, and *building* to show the positive effects of the competency standards.
- Call the training initiative something fun—like *Our Library University*, *Learning 2.0 Initiative* (as did the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County), *Library Camp*, or anything else the taskforce can come up with—an energizing name to which you can refer during the assessment and training process.
- Deliver the competencies descriptions in a positive way—stressing how learning these new skills will help the employees, making their work lives easier.
- Create a Web page with all the information about the competencies: the various competencies lists and assessment tools, the mission statement, links to training materials, and lists of upcoming trainings.

Finally, it is essential at this stage to get manager buy-in at every level. Every staff member that supervises the work of any other staff member needs to believe in the competency standards and be willing to implement and enforce them. From every supervisor, you need a commitment to do the following:

- Discuss the competency standards with their staff members on an ongoing basis.
- Ensure that their staff members are accurately assessed.
- Send staff members who need training or retraining to the appropriate sessions. This includes allowing them off-desk time for self-study, not just formal training.
- Make the competencies a part of the staff evaluation or review

If a manager does not agree to the above requirements, it's time to call in the big gun: the director. Without

uniform application and encouragement in all units and departments, the competency standards will only create a patchwork of tech-savvy staff members. Others, largely those whose managers do not believe in the project and therefore do not support it, will fall by the wayside and be left behind. No one wants that.

At this point, the task force has completed its mission. The competencies have been researched, descriptions have been created, and the competencies list has been launched to the staff. Now, as we move into assessment and training, the library's training coordinator (or whoever else has been designated as head of the task force or ringleader of the assessment and training process) needs to take over. The upcoming parts of the process are quite revealing of the abilities and knowledge of individual staff members. For confidentiality's sake, the fewer people involved at this stage, the better.

Notes

1. Beth McNeil and Joan Giesecke, "Core Competencies for Libraries and Library Staff," in *Staff Development: A Practical Guide*, 3rd ed., ed. Elizabeth Fuseler Avery, Terry Dahlin, and Deborah A. Carver (Chicago: American Library Association, 2001).
2. J. Smith, "Linking Competencies to Compensation at Toyota," in *Conference Proceedings of Linkage Incorporated, USA*, 5, (November 4, 1998), 281-320.
3. Helene Blowers, "PLCMC Learning 2.0 Finale (or 'the winner is . . .')," Learning 2.0 Blog, November 1, 2006, <http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com/2006/11/plcmc-learning-20-finale-or-winner-is.html> (accessed January 9, 2007).
4. Anne Woodsworth, "New Library Competencies," *Library Journal* 122, no. 9 (May 15, 1997): 46.
5. Florence M. Stone and Randi T. Sachs, *The High-Value Manager: Developing the Core Competencies Your Organization Demands* (New York: AMACOM, 1995): 52-3.