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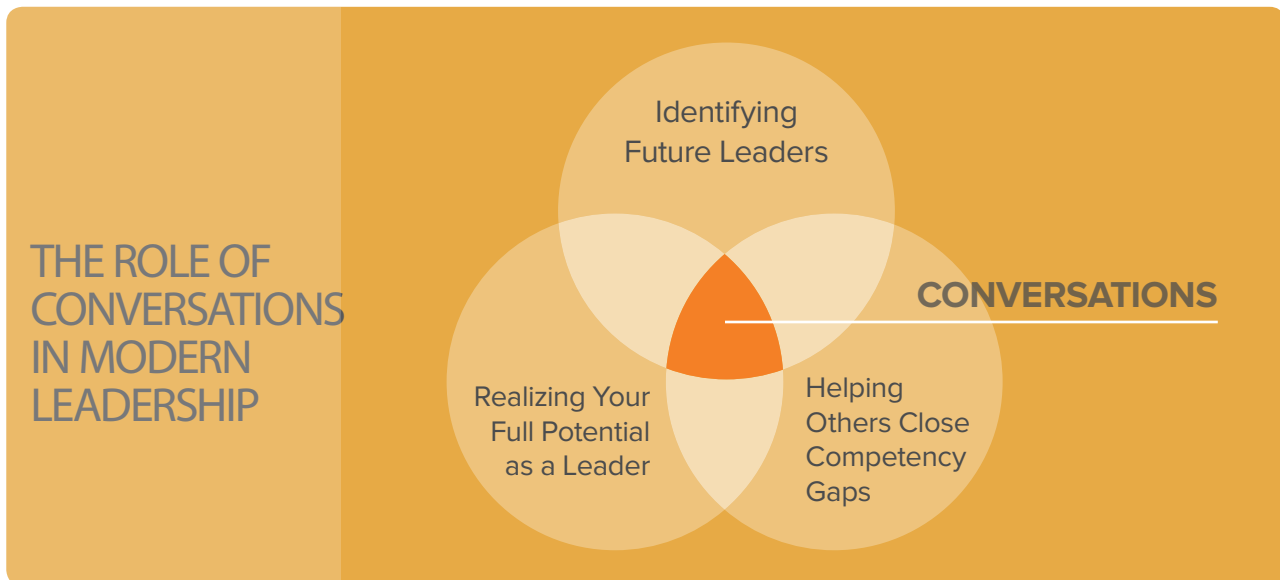
Conversations: The Linchpin of Leadership Competencies

a fierce white paper

Conversations: The Linchpin of Leadership Competencies

OVERVIEW

Leadership has changed significantly over the last twenty years. Communication plays an increasingly pivotal role, and standout leaders understand the value of a collective workforce. No longer reliant on title or authority, true leaders are those with engaged followers—those who are able to effectively communicate a clear vision and align others around it.



One reason for the shift from an individual to a collective focus is organizations are more transparent than ever, and information is readily accessible. The volume of available data continues to grow dramatically, and information flows like never before in history. It doesn't originate exclusively from the top. It isn't culled from limited sources. It comes from every direction and across the globe.

Along with the expanded possibilities of the global workforce comes a higher level of interdependency, even in roles traditionally considered independent or isolated. Relationships are key—with supervisors and reports, colleagues and customers, internally and externally, and they're established through day-to-day interactions.

Conversations are the linchpin, the central cohesive anchor, supporting leadership success in the 21st century.

This white paper addresses the following:

- **Communication as a Leadership Competency**
- **Communication as a Remedy For Closing Other Competency Gaps**
- **How to Expand Checklist Mentality Through Conversations**
- **Why Building a Culture of Leaders Matters**

“The common thread is the need to connect effectively with those around you—whether the goal is to form powerful teams, establish rapport that leads to results, or gather information to make informed decisions.”

Susan Scott, President and CEO, Fierce, Inc.

47%

of executives ranked communication among the top targeted leadership skills.

Chief Learning Officer and the Human Capital Media (HCM) Advisory Group survey

INTRODUCTION

Most Fortune 500 organizations use competencies to one degree or another within their talent management strategies. Some identify competencies by specific role, function, or job family, some as requirements, and some as development for growth.

Unlike traditional job descriptions, competencies identify how individuals will carry out responsibilities, rather than just what they will do. Consistent language provides a structure for identifying and selecting the right people as well as a way to measure performance, provide effective feedback, and identify development needs and opportunities.

COMMUNICATION AS A LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY

Every organization has unique aspects and needs, which result in a varied selection of leadership competencies. While experts may call leadership competencies by different names, focus on different aspects, and drill down to different levels, the themes, content, and essence of leadership competencies are essentially the same.¹

“There are some leadership competencies we see continuously,” said Susan Scott, CEO at Fierce, Inc. “For example, effective leaders in any industry need to be *trustworthy*, *results driven*, and make *quality decisions*. The common thread is the need to connect effectively with those around you—whether the goal is to form powerful teams, establish rapport that leads to results, or gather information to make informed decisions.”

In a recent survey conducted by *Chief Learning Officer* and the Human Capital Media (HCM) Advisory Group, 47% of executives ranked communication among the top targeted leadership skills. According to another survey conducted by American Management Association (AMA) *communication*, along with *critical thinking*, *collaboration*, and *creativity* were described as the four most valuable competencies

¹ Tett, R. P., Guterman, H. A., Bleier, A., & Murphy, P. J. (2000). Development and content validation of a “hyperdimensional” taxonomy of managerial competence. *Human Performance*, 13(3), 205-251.

67

unique competencies are identified by Lombardo and Eichinger...most have direct connections to communication or offer up communication techniques for building skills.

for 21st century leaders. The study went on to state the “four Cs” would become even more important to organizations in the future.

Communication is continually classified as a top leadership competency across all industries because leaders don’t realize their full potential if they cannot effectively articulate their ideas. They may be able to create the perfect strategy; yet, if they are unable to communicate needs, elicit help, incorporate expertise from other specialties, or inspire others to collaborate on their vision, full-scale success remains unattainable.

Lee Lacocca is famous for having said, “You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere.”

COMMUNICATION AS A REMEDY FOR CLOSING OTHER COMPETENCY GAPS

Not only is communication one of the most frequently identified leadership competencies, it is also one of the most prescribed areas of development for other competency gaps.

Sixty-seven unique competencies are identified by Lombardo and Eichinger, authors of two of the most widely used competency development guides, “For Your Improvement” and “The Career Architect Development Planner.” Among the 67, most have direct connections to communication or offer up communication techniques for building skills.

Competencies as seemingly individualistic as *creativity*, *process management*, and *priority setting* are supported through communication. To be skilled at creativity people must “connect with ideas from outside [his or her] own area” and draw out the “creative initiatives of others.” *Process management* requires that a person “knows how to organize people and activities” and communicates with others to uncover a clear “picture of the processes necessary to get things done.” And *priority setting* requires the ability to efficiently coordinate efforts, foresee roadblocks, and prepare alternate solutions—all enhanced through collaborative conversational skills.

HOW TO EXPAND CHECKLIST MENTALITY THROUGH CONVERSATIONS

Progressive human resource management teams are moving beyond the checklist and toward a more common sense approach to growing leaders and closing competency gaps. In the past, a compliance mindset led people to seek out individual solutions (training, readings, on-the-job activities etc.) for every identified competency rather than looking for themes, uncovering individual needs, and building capacity through conversations.

“Building competency and closing gaps requires ongoing commitment and conversations that continually reevaluate what success looks like and how to achieve it.”

Kim Bohr, EVP of Client Development, Fierce, Inc.

“That’s like having a boatful of people and not giving each one an oar. You’re wasting an opportunity if you’re not developing leadership skills and competencies within everyone, at every level.”

Susan Scott, President and CEO, Fierce, Inc.

Competitive advantage is attained through human talent. And people develop and grow when learning is relevant, applicable, and continually revisited.

“Employee development conversations aren’t one-time events. You can’t just check the box and move on to the next competency,” said Bohr. “Building competency and closing gaps requires ongoing commitment and conversations that continually reevaluate what success looks like and how to achieve it.”

WHY BUILDING A CULTURE OF LEADERS MATTERS

Not only has the role of the leaders changed significantly over the last two decades, the hierarchical leadership model of the past has changed as well. Title and authority over others do not automatically make a strong leader; engaged followers define a leader. The ability to effectively communicate a clear vision, and align others around it, is true leadership.

While the command-and control style is no longer effective in today’s global economy, some organizations persist in traditional structures. They continue to believe not everyone needs to be a leader—some are paid to be leaders, some to be followers.

“To me that’s like having a boatful of people and not giving each one an oar,” said Susan Scott, President and CEO at Fierce. “You’re wasting an opportunity if you’re not developing leadership skills and competencies within everyone, at every level. When every contributor holds a posture of leadership, organizations move forward and thrive.”

While not everyone is a decision-maker, developing the leader within everyone builds employee engagement, increases collective expertise and capability, leads to the discovery of high-potentials, and aids succession planning by growing future leaders.

CONCLUSION

Leadership in the 21st century requires effective and continuous communication with colleagues, clients, supervisors, reports, and customers. Conversations, and the resulting trust and relationships, determine success—first for individuals and then for organizations.

Communication is not only one of the top leadership competencies, it is one of the top solutions for closing most competency gaps. The role of conversation is critical in identifying the right people, ensuring they remain engaged, and developing them to their full potential.

Engagement, productivity, and profitability are all tied to relationships. And relationships are established through daily interactions. As the linchpin supporting all aspects of leadership success, conversations grow current and future leaders, provide a holistic and individualized approach to development, and determine what happens and what doesn't happen within every organization.

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Lombardo, Michael M., and Robert W. Eichinger. *The Career Architect Development Planner: A Systematic Approach to Development including 103 Research-based and Experience-tested Development Plans and Coaching Tips: For Learners, Managers, Mentors, and Feedback Givers*. 4th ed. [Minneapolis]: Korn/Ferry International, 2007. Print.

Tett, R. P., Guterman, H. A., Bleier, A., & Murphy, P. J. (2000). *Development and Content Validation of a "Hyperdimensional" Taxonomy of Managerial Competence*. *Human Performance*, 13(3), 205-251.

ABOUT FIERCE

Fierce, Inc. is an award-winning [leadership development and training](#) company that drives results for business and education by developing conversation as a skill. Fierce creates authentic, energizing and rewarding connections with colleagues and customers through skillful conversations that lead to successful outcomes and measurable ROI. Tailored to any organization, Fierce principles and methods translate across the globe, ensure individual and collective success and develop skills that are practical, easy-to-learn and can be applied immediately. Fierce's programs have been successfully implemented at blue-chip companies worldwide, including Ernst & Young, Starbucks, Wal-Mart, Coca-Cola, CARE and Crate & Barrel. Fierce has received numerous industry and business accolades. The company has twice been honored as an [Inc. 500|5000](#) company, and in 2011 was named to TrainingIndustry.com's [Companies to Watch](#) list and Seattle Business Magazine's [100 Best Companies to Work For in Washington](#) list