

THE VITAL FEW LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Do more with less leadership development by focusing on the competencies and activities that produce organisational results

A summary of the work of Dr Jim Trinka

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In the December 2006 issue of our email newsletter **Thinking Leadership**, we briefly outlined the vital few leadership competencies Dr Jim Trinka defined during his presentation to the HRINZ Leadership SIG in November 2006. As promised, here's some more information and background behind Jim's work.

About Jim Trinka

Firstly, a little about Jim Trinka. He is associated in New Zealand with HortResearch, where he supported and mentored their HR team and Chief Executive in their Good to Great leadership development programme, which won the HRINZ HR Initiative of the Year Award in 2005. He has held senior roles with Internal Revenue Service, FBI and now he's Director, ATO Training, Federal Aviation Authority.

There are three main themes in Jim's work:

1. Develop people's strengths, and make their weaknesses irrelevant
2. Great leadership is the result of great leadership effectiveness, and results in high levels of engagement of people
3. "A leader's path is complex and confusing, and I try to make the way seem simpler."

The research projects

In his Leadership SIG presentation Jim identified the 'vital few leadership competencies' - those competencies that differentiate great leaders from others. So how did he make that distinction? He was involved in three key research projects on leadership development:

- **Project 1:** A sample of over 1,000 IRS managers - where 10 of 21 competencies differentiated best leaders from the rest.
- **Project 2:** A sample of over 100 HortResearch managers - where 9 of 23 competencies differentiated best managers from the rest
- **Project 3:** A sample of over 500 US government-wide managers - where 8 of 25 competencies differentiated the best managers from the rest.

The differentiating competencies are listed in the Appendix at the end of this article.

All three research projects had the following in common:

- The competency ratings were established using 360-degree leadership effectiveness assessments
- The best leaders had strengths in only 4 of the 8, 9 or 10 differentiating competencies (they weren't all great at all differentiating competencies)
- It didn't matter which 4 were strengths

As Jim points out, the differentiating competencies need not be the most important characteristics/competencies of leaders; but they are those that differentiate. For instance all managers may score highly on integrity, diversity awareness, and teamwork; they are therefore not differentiators - they are what Jim terms Foundation Competencies.

Melding the results from the three projects

Jim took the research from the three projects, and analysed the data further. In his words they 'applied the filter'. They extracted the common definitions from the various models studied, and came up with the **vital few leadership competencies**:

1. **Developing others** - creates an environment and strategy to support continuous on-the-job learning
2. **Performance management** (results-driven performance) - clarifies performance expectations and gives timely, constructive feedback on tasks and assignments
3. **Communication** - strategically uses communication to produce enthusiasm and foster an atmosphere of open exchange and support

Specific actions that bring the competencies to life

How do these competencies turn into specific actions that drive leadership effectiveness? Jim distinguished the 15 statistically significantⁱ managerial activities that made the vital few competencies 'come to life'. They are (from most significant to least significant):

1. Explain performance evaluation standards
2. Ensure projects provide learning
3. Provide experiences that develop
4. Assess development progress
5. Help find training
6. Feedback on personality strengths
7. Create individual development plans
8. Feedback on performance weaknesses
9. Help apply new skills/knowledge
10. Pass along job openings
11. Pass along development opportunities
12. Feedback on performance strengths
13. Teach new skill or procedures
14. Ensure necessary skills/knowledge
15. Give advice from your own experience

The business caseⁱⁱ

Managers who are effective at employee engagement have employees who are more likely to stay, more satisfied, more committed to the organisation, and more productive. For a fuller explanation of the correlation between employee engagement and business performance indicators I suggest you read *First, Break All The Rules - what the world's greatest managers do differently*, by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman.

Summary

As I see it, the key points in Jim's work are:

- There is a minimum standard of competency required for effective leadership - foundational competencies
 - A vital few competencies differentiate the best leaders from the rest
 - An effective leader needs strengths in at least 4 differentiating competencies
 - 15 managerial activities are significant in delivering the vital few competencies
 - Foundational competencies, plus the vital few competencies create leadership effectiveness and employee engagement
 - Organisations with highly effective leaders have highly engaged people and better results
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Additional resources (as at 14 March 2007):

IRD Case Study:

http://www.ourpublicservice.org/usr_doc/IRS_Developing_Change_Leaders.pdf

Article: What's A Leader To Do? By Dr Jim Trinka

http://www.govleaders.org/whats_a_manager_to_do.htm

Article: Action Plan to Achieve Breakthrough Improvement in Employee Productivity and Leadership Effectiveness, By Dr Jim Trinka

http://www.govleaders.org/action_plan.htm

Article: Articles on Employee Engagement from the Gallup Management Journal

<http://www.govleaders.org/gallup.htm>

Appendix - Differentiating Competencies

Top 10 competencies - IRS project

1. Developing others
2. Communication
3. Influencing/negotiating
4. Group leadership
5. Service motivation
6. Business acumen
7. Political savvy
8. Strategic thinking
9. External awareness
10. Problem solving

Top 9 competencies - HortResearch project

1. Develops others
2. Sets standards
3. Builds relationships
4. Humble
5. Communication
6. Positive
7. Collaborates
8. Change champion
9. Self-aware/managing

Top 8 competencies - US Government-wide project

1. Develops others
2. Encourages critical thinking
3. Genuinely listens
4. Seeks collaboration
5. Communicates vision
6. Constructive feedback
7. Builds relationships
8. Achieves goals

Gail Reichert is Principal Consultant and Director of Leader's Edge Ltd. She is based on the Hibiscus Coast north of Auckland, and helps boost organisational energy and improve employee engagement through leadership development.

In addition to employee engagement and leadership development, you can use Leader's Edge for the following:

- Sorting out problem behaviours in teams
- Performance improvement and organisational development consulting
- Facilitation of strategic planning and vision-building activities
- Thought-partnership on organisational performance issues

Gail is a performance improvement consultant, Chartered Accountant and NLP Practitioner. To find out more about her click through to www.leadersedge.co.nz/ourpeople.htm

Contact Leader's Edge now for a complimentary discussion to find out how Gail might help you improve the performance of the leaders in your organisation.

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Footnotes:

ⁱ Learning & Development Roundtable 2003 Employee Development Survey

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