

The Five Competencies Framework

Introduction

In the influential book *Learning to Fly*, Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell (2001) describe five key organisational ‘competencies’. As already stated, we see these of being of high practical relevance for knowledge management and organisational learning initiatives. The **Five Competencies Framework** has been promoted widely and is now being used by many different teams or groups, to work out how well they are performing against organisationally established criteria for knowledge and learning, and to identify goals and priorities for improvement. The competency framework works on the principle that effective knowledge and learning is based on improving performance five important competency areas:

- Strategy development
- Management techniques
- Collaboration mechanisms
- Knowledge sharing and learning processes
- Knowledge capture and storage

Based on these competencies, Parcell and Collison have developed a framework to be worked through by groups and teams within a given organisation. This framework can be used to discover how well teams or groups believe they are performing against the pre-established criteria, and where they most wish to improve.

Detailed description of the process

The five competencies framework is an exercise enabling an organisation (or a group of organisations) to work out, in a simple and effective manner, what different elements have to **learn**, and what they have to share in the realm of organisational learning and knowledge management. Importantly, the framework also provides a common framework and language to support the knowledge and learning, and can be used to connect people with something to share to people with something to learn.

For each of the five competency areas outlined above, the framework describes five levels of performance, from basic to high. The framework is therefore a 5x5 matrix (see Figure 2). The first step is to get a group of stakeholders from across an organisation or team to work together to discuss relative strengths and areas for improvement in terms of knowledge and learning. The group should work to determine the Current Level for each of the competencies (use italics to highlight these) and the Target Level for each. The idea is to get the statement that best describes the organisation, rather than that the most exact. The target should be determined by projecting some reasonable time into the future – say, two years. The framework can also be used to determine the priorities for immediate action, through selection of the competency area which will yield greatest benefits if improved.

Key points/practical tips

- As stated in the introduction, this tool can be used to establish clear entry points and rationale for applying the range of tools contained in the present handbook.
- It is also a very good tool to support the improved communication and understanding of knowledge and learning strategies.

Example: CARE International

As part of a Partnership Programme Agreement (awarded by DFID), CARE International UK was looking to develop four regional knowledge networks, focusing on HIV/AIDS, private sector partnerships (PPPs), international financial institutions (IFIs) and civil society organisations (CSOs).

As part of a two-day training course to help with the knowledge and learning aspects of this work, the CARE team was introduced to the five competencies approach, as well as a number of other tools that would help build capacity in each area. Following this, the team decided to run a KM strategy session as part of a five-day conference in Quito, Ecuador, under the PPP theme. The core of this was to explain the five competencies framework, and to get participants to think through where the network was at present, and where it wanted to be. The workshop proved to be a resounding success with participants, and laid the groundwork for the operation of the network in the future.

Sources and further reading

- Collison, C. and G. Parcell (2001) *Learning to Fly*, Oxford: Capstone. This tool is used here with kind permission of the authors. It has been adapted following applications by the author in a range of different settings in the development and humanitarian sectors.

Figure 2: Matrix for the five competencies framework

	STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT	MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES	COLLABORATION MECHANISMS	KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND LEARNING	KNOWLEDGE CAPTURE AND STORAGE
LEVEL 5 (HIGH)	Knowledge and learning are integral parts of the overall organisational strategy. A set of tools is available and well communicated, and the capacity to apply them is actively strengthened.	Managers and leaders recognise and reinforce the link between knowledge, learning and performance. Managers regularly apply relevant tools and techniques, and act as learning role models. Staff ToRs contain references to knowledge sharing and learning.	Collaboration is a defining principle across the organisation. A range of internal and external collaboration mechanisms operate, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities in terms of the organisational goals. Some have clear external deliverables while others develop capability in the organisation.	Prompts for learning are built into key processes ... Programme staff routinely find out who knows what, inside and outside the organisation, and talk with them. A common language, templates and guidelines support effective sharing.	Information is easy to access and retrieve. Selected information is sent to potential users in a systematic and coherent manner. High priority information assets have multiple managers who are responsibility for updating, summarising and synthesising information. Exit interviews and handovers are used systematically.
LEVEL 4	A knowledge and learning strategy exists, but is not integrated with overall goals. A set of tools for knowledge and learning <i>is</i> available and understood by most staff.	Management view knowledge and learning as everyone's responsibility. Managers increasingly ask for and exhibit learning approaches. There are rewards and incentives for using such approaches.	Networks are organised around business needs and have a clear governance document. Supportive technology is in place and is well used. External parties are being included in some networks.	'Learning before, during and after is the way things are done around here.' Beneficiaries and partners participate in review sessions. External knowledge plays a role in shaping projects.	Key information is kept current and easily accessible. One individual acts as the guardian of each information asset, and encourages people to contribute. Many do.
LEVEL 3	There are ongoing discussions about developing a knowledge and learning strategy. A wide range of tools are being used across the organisation.	<u>Knowledge and learning is viewed as the responsibility of a specific role or roles.</u> <u>Some managers talk the talk, but don't always walk the walk!</u>	<u>People are using networks and working groups to get results. Peers are helping peers across organisational boundaries</u> <u>Formal collaboration mechanisms are being created and recognised.</u>	<u>People can find out what the organisation knows. Some examples of sharing and learning are highlighted and recognised across the organisation. Some information translates across boundaries.</u>	<u>Specific groups take responsibility for their own information and begin to collect it in one location in a common format. Some is summarised for easy access by others. Searching information assets before starting activities is encouraged, as is sharing lessons afterwards. Some handovers take place.</u>
LEVEL 2	<u>Many people say that sharing knowledge is important to the organisations success. Some people are using some tools to help with learning and sharing.</u>	<i>Some managers give people the time to share and learn, but there is little visible support from the top.</i>	Ad hoc personal networking is used by individuals who know each other to achieve goals. This is increasingly recognised as vital to the organisation.	<i>People learn before doing and programme review sessions. They sometimes capture what they learn for the purpose of sharing, but in practice few do access it.</i>	<i>A few groups capture lessons learned after a project, and look for information before starting a project. There is potential access to lots of information, but it is not summarised.</i>
LEVEL 1 (BASIC)	<i>A few people express that knowledge is important to the organisation. Isolated individuals begin to talk about how important – and difficult – it is.</i>	Knowledge and learning viewed with scepticisms. Management think learning leads to lack of accountability. 'Knowledge is power' at the highest levels of the organisation.	<i>Knowledge hoarders seem to get rewarded. There are few cross-cutting collaborations. Silos are hard to break down.</i>	People are conscious of the need to learn from what they do but rarely get the time. Sharing is for the benefit of specific teams.	Some individuals take the time to capture their lessons, but do so in a confusing variety of formats. Most don't contribute to information assets, and even fewer search them. No exit interviews or handovers take place.

Italics: Where we are now

Underlined: Where we aim to be (in specified time)

Highlighted: Priority competency area