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Competencies for Leading Diverse Teams

A. Renée Yuengling, PhD

Yuengling & Associates



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Directed by Dr. Daniel P. McDonald, Director of Research

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# Competencies for Leading Diverse Teams

# The purpose and objective of this paper is to develop an initial diversity competency model for general population mid-level civilian and military managers in the United States Department of Defense. The purpose of the model is to provide leadership competencies and learning objectives from which to develop outcome-based diversity and inclusion training for mid-level Department of Defense, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard service members and civilian employees. The intent of the model is to provide clear behavioral competencies for managers that, when implemented, will lead to an inclusive environment for all employees. The model is based on rigorous methodology and grounded in the current relevant research on diversity including the social psychological processes related to diversity in organizations and other relevant related disciplines.

It is important to stress this competency model is for general population managers, NOT diversity practitioners. The competencies required in each of these cases are different, and the current task is to develop a model for general population managers, which will allow the integration of diversity competencies into basic leadership competencies. The competencies focus on the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to create an inclusive diversity climate, which supports the presence of representational diversity. It is also necessary that these competencies for diversity management map to the Department of Defense /Defense Language Office cross-cultural competencies (3C) to the extent possible. This 3C model is detailed in “A Framework for Cross Cultural Competencies and Learning Recommendations,” published by the Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division (NAWCTSD) and the Defense Language Office (DLO).

# It is problematical to develop a competency model that is restricted to successful behaviors for working with, managing, or leading a diverse workforce. Historically, due to the development of the discipline, diversity skills have been perceived as an “add-on,” that is, not core behaviors. This perception is entirely incorrect, and as our workforces become ever more diverse, as we learn more about leadership and leadership competencies, we have begun to understand that the effective management of diversity is a fundamental leadership skill. Therefore, the competencies outlined below should not be developed in isolation from basic leadership competencies, but should be integrated into, and be a seamless part of those leadership competencies. To facilitate understanding as well as to limit confusion- in this document diversity is specifically defined as comprising the generally accepted dimensions of diversity:

# Human – age, race, ethnicity, physical ability, sex, and sexual orientation

# Cultural – including but not limited to all aspects of culture such as language, religion, nationality, background, learning styles, etc. This dimension of diversity can be considered to be almost infinite in its variations.

# Organizational – including but not limited to such aspects as unit, grade, rank, status, sector, and organizational location.

# In this way, the term diversity should be understood to encompass all the characteristics and attributes of individuals, with no group excluded.

# Background on Competency Modeling

There is voluminous research on competencies and competency modeling, and very little actual agreement and consistency. There are also wide variations in approaches to competency modeling that are relevant to examine before addressing the particular challenges of developing a diversity competency model. In addition there are several significant and serious challenges to developing a diversity competency model that also must be clearly understood prior to the development or adoption of any set of competencies. These will be discussed in a separate section below.

**Competency.** The definition of the term “competency” appears to vary widely, even among professionals (Schippmann, et al., 2000). Competencies are typically defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities and other individual characteristics (often called knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics, KSAOs; including but not limited to motives, personality traits, self-concepts, attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests) that can be reliably measured and that can be shown to differentiate performance (Curnow, 2006; Mirabile, 1997; Schippmann, et al., 2000; Spencer, McClelland, & Spencer, 1994). The Office of Personnel Management (OPM)[[1]](#footnote-1) defines a competency as *"a measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully."* Competencies specify the "how" of performing job tasks, or what the person needs to do the job successfully (Shippmann et al., 2000). (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/Content.aspx>).

**Competency modeling**. Competency modeling is typically defined as the identification, definition, and measurement of the KSAOs that are needed to perform successfully on the job (Curnow, 2006; Bartram, 2004; Schippmann, et al., 2000). How success is defined is not generally addressed, and is the first challenge in the development of a diversity model. Competency modeling uses several different approaches: the two most common being the individual job level and the organization level (Mansfield, 1996). The individual job level competency model identifies the characteristics (i.e., KSAOs) that are necessary to be successful in a particular job (similar to job analysis), whereas the organizational level modeling takes into account organizational objectives, vision, and strategy and attempts to develop a set of competencies that are applied to the entire organization, a department within the organization, or a job family within the organization (Curnow, 2006; Lawler, 1994; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990).

**Job analysis**: Broadly defined, job analysis involves collecting data about observable job behaviors and delineating the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics needed to perform the job (Cascio & Aguinis, 2005;Curnow, 2006; Harvey, 1991). This broad definition is typically broken into two separate approaches to job analysis: worker-oriented job analysis and task-oriented job analysis. Worker-oriented job analysis is often referred to as job specification and deals with the necessary KSAOs for successful completion of the job. Task-oriented job analysis identifies what gets done on the job (i.e., the job-relevant behaviors) and how the job is conducted (including the tools, machinery, information, and people with which the incumbent typically interacts). This approach is often referred to as a job description, as it details the necessary behaviors for successful completion of the job (Cascio & Aguinis, 2005). In both cases, input from the successful job incumbent is necessary for identification and validation of the correct KSAOs. This again raises the significant challenge in the development of a diversity competency model.

**Cognitive Task Analysis**: As competency modeling becomes more pervasive and the complexity of the tasks confronting workers increases, there is increasing interest in cognitive task analysis (CTA), that is, the identification and analysis of cognitive processes that underlie task performance, which has been offered as a supplement to traditional task analysis (Chipman, Schraagen, & Shalin, 2000; Curnow, 2006; Sackett & Laczo, 2003). Cognitive task analysis (CTA) uses a variety of interview and observation strategies to capture a description of the knowledge that experts use to perform complex tasks. Complex tasks are defined as those where performance requires the integrated use of both controlled (conscious, conceptual) and automated (unconscious, procedural or strategic) knowledge to perform tasks that often extend over many hours or days (Yates, 2007). CTA is a valuable approach when advanced experts are available who reliably achieve a desired performance standard on a target task and the goal is to capture the “cognitive” knowledge used by them (Clark & Estes, 1999). While CTA would logically be a strong methodology for the development of diversity competencies, the need for “advanced experts” underlines the challenge in the development of a diversity competency model.

**Reliability of Competency Models**

In order for competency models to be useful, they must be valid and reliable. An important part of the validating models is to have incumbents or subject matter experts or the job analysts themselves rate the importance of each competency. Ideally, across raters, there will be agreement on the importance of each of the characteristics, demonstrating a high level of inter-rater reliability. A recent meta-analysis of job analysis reliability examined the levels of inter-rater and intra-rater reliability from forty-six studies (Curnow, 2006; Dierdorff & Wilson, 2003) and found that incumbents had the lowest reliabilities compared to analysts or technical experts. Recent work by Lievens, Sanchez, and DeCorte (2004) found that the overall inter-rater reliability of competency modeling judgments is quite low. However, just as the meta-analysis by Dierdorff and Wilson (2003) found, ratings made by subject matter experts (SMEs) are considerably more reliable across raters as compared to inexperienced incumbents. The question of the reliability of competency models will not be resolved here, but current findings that subject matter experts provide the greatest reliability provide some support to the recommended methodology described below.

# Benchmarking Competency Models in the Private Sector

# While it is beyond the scope of this project to complete a benchmarking analysis of the private sector, an informal analysis was conducted. Most major US organizations with mature diversity initiatives have been using some form of diversity "competencies" for quite some time. However, these competencies are not generally researched based, nor are they validated. Furthermore, in many cases they take the form of lists of very general behaviors, expectations, or accomplishments as they are typically used for accountability purposes. They also are often not used with lower and mid level managers, but more generally for senior leadership.

Additionally, neither the Society for Human Resource Managers (SHRM) nor Diversity, Inc., a firm well known for benchmarking and ranking organizations, could provide any additional information on the existence of diversity competencies in the sense of a validated model. SHRM reconfirmed that most of the KSAOs that would be included in a competency model are generally found in the ubiquitous lists from advanced experts, or would be "add-ons" to leadership or cultural models, if they existed at all. This is not meant to imply there are no organizations using researched-based and validated diversity competency models; it just means if they are, the models may be closely held as proprietary information. This is quite common in the private sector around some areas of diversity management, most notably the financial analysis around business cases. As these lists of behaviors are used for accountability of their executives, which then have significant financial implications for the executive, it seems quite likely the specific measurements may be withheld from public scrutiny.

**Methodology/ Limitations and requirements**

As noted above, there are several serious and significant challenges to the development of a diversity competency model for general population managers. According to Boulter, et al (1998), there are six stages involved in defining a competency model for a given job role. These stages are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Step 1. Performance criteria- | Defining the criteria for superior performance in the role |
| Step 2. Criterion sample − | Choosing a sample of people performing the role for data collection |
| Step 3 . Data collection − | Collecting sample data about behaviors that lead to success |
| Step 4. Data analysis − | Developing hypotheses about the competencies of outstanding performers and how these competencies work together to produce desired results |
| Step 5. Validation − | Validating the results of data collection and analysis |
| Step 6. Application − | Applying the competency models in human resource activities, as needed. |

In the development of competencies specifically related to diversity, the challenges arise immediately, in both Step 1 and Step 2:

***Step 1*** — There is no objective idea of what constitutes superior performance in the role; thus, there is no clear idea of what “success” in the function actually is. We all can conceive of managers who are inclusive, fair, unbiased, and skilled at managing culturally diverse populations. But in the complexity of managing on a day-to-day basis, what does that objectively look like? For every potential measure developed, there is the possibility that some other process is at play. If success looks like what is known as representational diversity, with diversity in the organization at all levels from top to bottom, such a situation may not necessarily be due to the diversity competency of managers; it could equally be due to malicious compliance with Affirmative Action regulations. If it is measured by employee satisfaction surveys in an effort to measure diversity climate or inclusion, a highly cohesive and effective work group equally could be due to the basic managerial skills of the manager or the self-efficacy of the employees.

However outcomes are measured, there is always the possibility of an alternative view of the behaviors causing the outcome. For example, a fair and unbiased manager may in fact be one with several EEO complaints against them- would that be considered successful? This is compounded by the reality that bias, in all of its forms, is a universal human behavior, a survival behavior, and we are in essence developing a model that requires individuals to behave in a way that is counter to human instincts.

***Step 2* —** The development of a competency model requires access to a “successful job incumbent” or “advanced experts.” Even if it were possible to define objectively success in the function, it is still necessary to determine with accuracy who is a successful job incumbent or an advanced expert. One possible resolution to this challenge has been to ask women and minorities themselves to identify fair, unbiased, and culturally skilled managers (Yuengling, 2005). However, the limitation to this approach is that the relative success of female and minority workers may be due to other elements unknown to them (their own efficacy, the match of skills to needs in a work unit, value match with managers, etc) - leading them to identify individuals who appeared to them to be unbiased and fair, but may have actually been acting out of completely different managerial skill sets. Additionally, there are significant political ramifications in trying to identify “successful job incumbents” for those who are not identified as successful.

One route around the challenge of finding a “successful job incumbent” would be to use “advanced experts” to develop a set of agreed-upon competencies. There are many diversity practitioners who have developed and published lists of KSAOs that are in some form or another, essentially the building blocks of competencies. Using these KSAOs would be one way of resolving the problem of finding successful job incumbents, but it also presents a different challenge. There is no credentialing authority in the diversity field, and no licensure. Any individual who chooses to call him or herself a diversity expert can do so, and can publish a list of KSAOs disconnected from any research or reality. In fact, many of the best-known diversity experts are self-published, with little or no scrutiny or peer review of their work. This is not to say that their work is meaningless or useless, it just means that caution must be observed in evaluating it.

# Another requirement placed on the development of this specific competency model may provide a pathway out of these challenges that are created by the nature of diversity in organizations. Part of the task defined in this paper is to map the diversity competencies to incorporate the subsequent refinement of these competencies into the cross cultural framework to be used by the US Deapartment of Defense and the military services. This is a reasonable and appropriate requirement as from the earliest research works on diversity the link to culture has been generally understood. That diverse populations are, in fact, cultural groups within the domestic US culture is accepted and has begun to be documented in the social psychology literature (Cox, 1993; Chávez-Guido, 1999; Dovidio, 2001; Garrett, 1999; Helgelson, 1999; Jackson, 1975). This is based on the idea that a cultural identity group can be based on physical distinctiveness but also share a socio-cultural identity. That is, they share a *subjective culture* (Triandis, 1976), meaning value preferences, norms, formation of worldviews, and goal priorities that distinguish one cultural group from another.

# Due to our history, the United States has had segmentation between racio-ethnic group culture and national cultures (Cox, 1993). Many Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans and European Americans have understood and identified with both their American culture and their heritage culture. There is also a growing body of research indicating that gender represents a cultural category, based on the significant socialization of human beings on the basis of gender (Hegelsen, 1990; Tannen, 1994). Taylor Cox thoroughly discusses the premise that gender, racio-ethnic and nationality groups differ culturally by a specific examination of six areas of cultural orientations and how they play out in organizations. These six areas are generally accepted as cultural dimensions and include: 1) time and space orientation, 2) leadership style orientation, 3) individualism versus collectivism, 4) competitive versus cooperative behavior, 5) locus of control and 6) communication styles (Cox, 1993).

# In fact, much of the research work on diversity explicitly discusses the fact that diversity work in organizations is cultural work. Rowe and Gardenschwartz (1997) note several “diversity variables” that affect both teamwork and conflict resolution: egalitarian culture versus hierarchical or authoritarian culture; direct communication style versus indirect styles; individualistic culture versus group or collectivistic culture; task-oriented focus versus more social or relationship-oriented focus; and change oriented cultures versus traditional cultures. The dynamics of intercultural contact in organizations are echoed in the nascent cultural research on demographic groups (Gelfand et al, 2007; Punkett & Shankar, 2007; Sanchèz-Burkes, 2000). Several research studies also are able to discern significant cultural differences between the groups using the government-mandated EEO categories (Guillory, 1994; Trompenaars, 1998).

# With regard to this body of work, it is consistent with sound research principles to approach diversity competencies as overlapping with cultural competencies. In fact, diversity competencies are explicitly included as cultural competencies in the Department of Defense Cross-Cultural Roadmap (DoD, 2010), a study designed to support the DoD in the development of cultural competencies:

“There are many different definitions of 3C depending on the context, but they all have the same essential outcome, i.e., 3C is broadly defined as the ability to operate effectively in any culturally complex environment. It is based on a set of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes (KSAAs) developed through education, training and experience that promote cross-cultural competence and enhance that ability. The KSAAs offer a conceptual framework for learning about and understanding a particular culture or cultural group, which can range from a unit’s own cultural diversity to the various cultures in joint, interagency, coalition and multinational contexts.” (DOD 3C Roadmap, pg1).

# Based on this need, and grounded in the research to date on diversity, approaching the competency model in connection to cultural competencies would appear to be both valid and useful.

# Proposed methodology

# It follows that a rigorous methodology for the development of a diversity competency model must meet two requirements:

# 1) Address the challenges to the standard methodology detailed above presented by the unique nature of diversity in organizations;

# 2) Map and align the competencies as closely as possible to the cross-cultural competencies (3C) developed by the Department of Defense.

# Fortunately, the inherent coherence of the second requirement provides an elegant solution to the challenges presented by the first requirement. The proposed methodology for the development of the diversity competencies is to collect and synthesize the work of the acknowledged “advanced” diversity experts, both practitioners and researchers in the field, and map those results against the cultural competencies developed by the Department of Defense. While acknowledging that the “competencies” developed by the advanced experts are not validated, and may be not much more that thoughts and lists of ideas for successful behavior, they constitute the best practices in the field to date. Mapping them against the core competencies developed from more rigorously researched cultural competencies to examine overlap and additional areas of interest may lend credence to their validity and permit the identification of common areas of behavior. In this way we can develop diversity core competencies and core enablers based on the expert knowledge of advanced diversity practitioners and grounded in both diversity and cultural research. Figure 1 shows the Department of Defense Cross Cultural Competency Model with both competencies and core enablers.

# Figure 1:

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# Figure 2 shows a proposed diversity competency model based on the existing framework of cross cultural core competencies and core enablers. It should be noted that the core competencies and core enablers remain virtually the same in both models, with only two additions: Creating an Inclusive Culture as a core competency, and Integrity as a core enabler. However, the descriptors and measures are different in many, but not all respects. In addition, the core competencies are divided into two categories, thinking factors and connecting factors. Thinking factors are those that are cognitively laden, and rely on the individual’s acquisition of the competency. The connecting factors are those that place emphasis on interaction with other individuals. There is some level of overlap of the three competencies in the connecting category: communication, interpersonal skills and cultural adaptability. In addition, because diversity competencies require both the management of individuals and management of groups of individuals, those competencies related to individuals fall under interpersonal skills, and those related to management of groups and ultimately climate appear under cultural adaptability.

# Figure 2:

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**Discussion of Core Competencies**

The seven core competencies with the behavioral anchors are detailed below:

**Cognitive – Thinking Factors**

1 - Applying Cultural Knowledge

* Applies knowledge of factual information about the history of the racial, ethnic, and gender groups in the United States, and the past and current (a) social, (b) political,   
  (c) cultural and (d) economic situation
* Recognizes the impact of the historical development of civil rights and diversity in the United States
* Differentiates between representational diversity, inclusion, diversity climate, and employee engagement.

2 - Organizational Awareness

* Understands the mission and functions of one’s own organization, and how diversity connects to the mission
* Comprehends the regulatory requirements of EEO/EO and distinguishes both the differences and linkages with diversity
* Operates effectively within the organization by applying knowledge of how the organization’s programs, policies, procedures, rules, and regulations may either enhance or create barriers for representational diversity and inclusion

3 - Cultural Perspective-Taking

* Demonstrates an awareness of one’s own cultural assumptions, values, preferences, and biases, and understands how their own identity group is viewed by members of other identity groups
* Applies perspective-taking skills to detect, analyze, and consider the point of view of others and recognizes how the other will interpret his/her actions
* Understands the formation of social identity, privilege, and bias structures, and can identify when they may be at play in organizational processes
* Analyzes the cultural context when interpreting environmental cues

**Connecting Factors – Interactions**

4 – Communication

* Recognizes and manages both verbal and non-verbal cues about personal attitudes towards diversity in general and racial, ethnic, and gender groups specifically
* Distinguishes the impact of racial, ethnic and gender culture on communication behaviors, and can identify when they may create conflict of misunderstanding among work groups
* Listens carefully to others, paying close attention to the speaker’s point of view
* Communicates thoughts and ideas in a way that is relevant to the listener
* Adjusts communication style to meet expectations of audience
* Seeks additional clarifying information when necessary

5 - Interpersonal Skills

* Develops and maintains positive rapport by showing respect, courtesy, and tact with others
* Interacts effectively with a variety of people
* Relates and adjusts well to people from varied backgrounds in different situations
* Engages in self-management when personal biases are activated or present

6 - Cultural Adaptability

* Understands the implications of one’s actions and adjusts approach to maintain positive and bias free relationships with individuals or groups of other racial ethnic or gender cultures
* Gathers and interprets information about people and surroundings to increase awareness about how to interact with others
* Integrates well into situations in which people have different values, customs, and cultures
* Shows respect for others’ values and customs

7- Creates an Inclusive Environment

* Takes a multicultural versus colorblind approach when interacting with others
* Sets, communicates, and maintains standards for all
* Seeks and accepts feedback on diversity related issues
* Creates focus on super ordinate identity (team) and task
* Recognizes the diversity issues present in mentoring
* Focuses on performance results, not performance style
* Ensures decisions and behaviors reflect fairness
* Develops direct reports and fosters talent throughout organization.

**Core Enablers**

**Resilience Factors**

***Cognitive bias resilience***

* **Tolerance of Ambiguity** – Accepts, or does not feel threatened by, ambiguous situations and uncertainty. Manages uncertainty in new and complex situations where there is not necessarily a “right” way to interpret things
* **Low Need for Closure** – Restrains from settling on immediate answers and solutions, and remains open to any new information that conflicts with those answers
* **Suspending Judgment** – Withholds personal or moral judgment when faced with novel experiences, knowledge and points of view. Perceives information neutrally and withholds or suspends judgment until adequate information becomes available
* **Inclusiveness** – Tendency to include and accept things (including people) based on commonality of commitment to mission
* **Multiculturalism** – Understands and adopts a multicultural approach rather than a “colorblind” approach.

***Emotional resilience***

* **Stress Resilience** – Avoids adopting stress-induced perspectives that overly simplify culture; demonstrates tendency for positive emotional states and to respond calmly and steadfastly to stressful events; acts as a calming influence
* **Emotion Regulation** – Regulates/controls one’s own emotions and emotional expression to support mission performance.

***Self-identity resilience***

* **Self-Confidence** – Believes in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet situational demands
* **Self-Identity** –Demonstrates ability to maintain personal values independent of situational factors
* **Reciprocity** – Understands that others have different social identities, cultures, and values that are not threats to one’s own identity or values
* **Optimism** – Views problems as solvable challenges and as exciting learning opportunities.

**Engagement Factors**

***Learning motivation***

* **Learning through Observation** – Gathers and interprets information about people and surroundings to increase awareness about own treatment and how to treat others. Is motivated to make sense of inconsistent information about social rules and norms; continually learns and updates own knowledge base as new situations are encountered
* **Inquisitiveness –** Is receptive towards, and takes an active pursuit of understanding ideas, values, norms, situations, and behaviors that are new and different. Demonstrates curiosity about different countries and cultures, as well as interest in world and international events.

**Social interaction**

* **Social Flexibility –** Presents oneself to others in a manner that creates favorable impressions, facilitates relationship building, and influences others. Is able to modify ideas and behaviors, compromise, and be receptive to new ways of doing things
* **Willingness to Engage –** Actively seeks out and explores unfamiliar cross-cultural interactions and regards them positively as a challenge
* **Integrity –** Demonstrates adherence to moral and ethical principles, soundness of moral character, honesty.

**Learning objectives**

Based on the competencies detailed above, it is possible to identify learning objectives linked to the competencies and supported by current research. These learning objectives will ensure that the diversity training is in alignment with the competencies and also in accordance with the research literature.

**Validation of model**

This initial set ofdiversity competencies and learning objectives represents a synthesis of “advanced expert knowledge” of the competency, if not the descriptor level, and maps one-to-one to the Department of Defense Cross-Cultural Competency (3C) model. The diversity competencies can be used as the basis for the training objectives for a rigorous, research-based diversity training plan of instruction. In the face of continuing existing challenges to a more traditional competency model methodology, one method of validating these competencies would be to train a pilot class to the competencies, and follow up with a longitudinal analysis of their performance as effective managers of diversity. The initial validation of this model has begun with several National Guard Units, (Nevada, Arizona, Washington) and a large Naval Command. It is currently under review with the United States Air Force Academy, the United State Coast Guard Office of Leadership and Professional Development, and the Department of the Navy Center for Personal and Professional Development. The longitudinal study has not yet been developed.

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1. OPM is the human resources agency of the United States Federal government, and oversees all personnel policies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)