

# THE MUST-HAVE COMPETENCY

Stewart L. Stokes

**Of all the competencies that contribute to the sustainable effectiveness of information technology leaders and managers, what is the “must-have competency”? What competency enables highly successful IT professionals to stand out from the crowd and establish a track record of influential, effective, and long-lasting relationships with colleagues and customers on all levels? What competency can be the tie-breaker in final interview situations when all the candidates look alike on paper? This article focuses on an often-observed but less often-discussed competency that may be difficult to define but is easily recognized.**

**T**AKE A MOMENT AND REFLECT UPON all the managers and leaders with whom and for whom you have worked. Those who come to mind immediately are probably those who were really good or really bad. Now, take two minutes to make a list of the really good ones; and beside each person’s name, describe the competency that you believe contributed the most to his or her success. What was it that she or he knew, understood, or was able to do that made him or her outstanding? Likewise, for those on the other end of the spectrum, what competency were they lacking that contributed the most to their mediocrity?

I gave that assignment to a group of IT managers, all of whom were in the process of making what I call the “toughest transition” in their careers: they were changing roles, moving from individual technical contributor to manager and leader. (Refer to “Managing the Toughest Transition: Part 1,” published in the Spring 2003 issue of this journal, and “Managing the Toughest Transition: Part 2” in the Summer 2003 issue of this journal.)

When discussing the competencies that enable people to attain consistently high levels of accomplishment in management and leadership positions, I do so by identifying five different and distinct dimensions:

1. Knowledge
2. Understanding
3. Skills
4. Attitudes
5. Values

The definitions of these five dimensions can be combined into one question: To attain consistently high levels of accomplishment as a project manager, director, CIO, or other type of leader, what must a person know, understand, and be able to do, and what attitudes and values are essential for success in this department, in this organization?

In the event you are wondering about the importance of the “attitudes and values” dimensions, you are not alone. Many people find themselves less comfortable with these “soft” dimensions than with the “hard” dimensions, those usually associated with technical competencies and skills. We also know, however, that it is the ability to use the soft skills, the “people skills,” that often distinguishes the leaders from the also-rans.

As individuals, we know what we believe deep down and these values shape our attitudes and our behaviors. When we speak and behave authentically, we are reflecting our values in what we say and what we do.

*STEWART L. STOKES is a member of the Information Systems Management Board of Advisers and Contributors, and President of the Information Technology consulting firm, BSE&C. He specializes in the application of leadership and behavioral skills within IT organizations and can be contacted at [stewstokes@worldnet.att.net](mailto:stewstokes@worldnet.att.net).*

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Attitudes and values also help define cultures, or “organizational personalities.” There may exist numerous subcultures within an overall corporate culture, each subculture helping to define how work gets done — as well as what works gets done. Those who question the importance of culture might reflect upon this. One of the key reasons newly hired CIOs fail is the lack of “fit” between the cultural values and attitudes they bring with them to their new organization and IT department, and the cultural values and attitudes already in place. Cultures are tough to change and not infrequently reject those who try.

(Note to readers: You might think about your own organizational and departmental cultures, and the attitudes and values necessary to succeed within them. If you are “between opportunities” and are actively interviewing, you might want to discuss during your interviews the specific attitudes and values essential for success in the positions that you are pursuing. Match these against your own, and determine if there is a “fit.” If you are “between opportunities” but are not yet interviewing, clarify your own attitudes and values and determine those that you believe are essential for your personal success. Pay special attention to the cultural “fit” issue when you are interviewing.)

#### **CRITICAL INCIDENTS AND RELATED BEHAVIORS**

I encouraged this group of new managers to identify the key competencies they observed in the outstanding managers and leaders with whom they had worked. To help them do this, I asked them first to describe critical incidents that either involved them or that they had observed, and that also involved more senior IT managers and leaders. I defined a “critical incident” as an event or sequence of events that was handled either poorly or well, and that either set matters back or moved them ahead.

I then asked them to focus on the behaviors of the senior managers or leaders, and to answer these five questions specifically:

1. What did they do?
2. When did they do it?
3. Why do you believe they did it?
4. What resulted from their actions?
5. Was there any particular competency that seemed to account for success or failure?

After several minutes of heads-down scribbling, I asked for feedback to these five questions. The majority of the incidents involved IT

managers, their direct reports, and internal customers in meetings, discussions, and negotiations. The topics did not concern themselves with technologies per se, but with how technologies would be implemented and utilized within business units. All the incidents included descriptions of how the ranking managers or leaders behaved, and the impact of their behaviors on immediate and longer-term relationships.

The majority of the critical incidents involved behavior that resulted in negative consequences, both short- and long-term. In many of the incidents, relationships between the IT people and their internal customers were harmed, in some cases, severely. Just about all the behaviors resulted in project delays and, in a couple of incidents, highly negative performance reviews. In one incident, the ranking IT person involved was at the director level and she described what she witnessed as a “train wreck.”

Most of the participants were surprised by the negative behaviors they heard their colleagues describe: excessive impatience, outright hostility, the occasional violation of personal space, and inappropriate outbursts (including people stomping out of the room and using inappropriate language). I was less surprised, however, and took the opportunity to ask questions about what they might have seen or heard that eventually led up to a “train wreck” kind of scenario. I doubted that such demonstrative negative behaviors emerged out of thin air. Something had to precede them, I thought, so I did a little digging.

In fact, what I found was that there had been early warning behaviors that had happened before, many of which had been ignored. One could think of these behaviors as symptoms that, left untreated, eventually grew into full-blown disorders.

One of the more common “red-flag” behaviors happened with individuals who perceived problems, perhaps in the project scope, plan, design, or technology, and whose attempts to bring the problems to the team’s attention were ignored or rebuffed. Not wanting to be labeled as complainers or “not team players,” they would lapse into silence and go along with the game. “Let the chips fall where they may,” they said. And the chips would fall.

A related red-flag behavior sometimes followed project meetings where few questions would be asked, usually to the surprise of the project leader or manager. What would happen after such meetings is that people would break

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up into small subgroups of two or three, wander off to the cafeteria or a vacant conference room, and proceed to raise all sorts of issues about the viability of the project. The trouble was that few of these sideline discussions and issues debated would make it back into team meetings; but the convictions underlying the concerns got acted out, usually with serious negative consequences.

A third behavior, again closely related to the above examples, was an unwillingness to put oneself (and perhaps one's performance review, if not one's job) on the line for a belief that might have run counter to "the way the wind was blowing." It is one thing to talk about "having the courage of one's convictions," but it is quite another thing to have the courage to act upon those convictions and live with the consequences. In some organizational cultures, one "gets along by going along;" and in today's tight IT job market with "offshoring" and outsourcing flourishing, one might be reluctant to take significant risks unless the consequences of not taking the risks might be worse.

The behaviors I heard described gave me the opportunity to discuss a competency that is increasingly on the "radar screens" of C-level executives, including CIOs: *emotional competency*. The absence of emotional competency contributed significantly to the "train wreck" scenarios previously described.

Emotional competency (or as some describe it, "emotional intelligence" or "emotional maturity") has attracted a lot of attention in recent years. (Refer to this article's Recommended Reading.) Emotional competency is especially relevant now, however. Thousands of IT professionals are either looking for work or trying to stay employed by doing multiple jobs. The possession and use of emotional competency can keep one "on an even keel" under stressful employment conditions. It can also be a tiebreaker in the job retention and job interview processes.

Emotional competency can be difficult to discuss, however. We are increasingly comfortable talking about the importance of interpersonal and business competencies to career success, in addition to technical competency, of course, but eyes glaze over when we discuss emotional competency. This is when the squirming begins — the word "emotional" makes many people nervous.

## THE ESSENCE OF EMOTIONAL COMPETENCY

Relax. This is not a "touchy-feely" discussion. Boiled down to its essence, emotional competency (EC) refers to how we use the broad array of self-management skills and behaviors that enable us to work with others and get things done in complex human environments. Emotional competency helps us harness what we know, understand, and are able to do in both our technical and interpersonal selves and then apply these competencies more effectively in the workplace and in our personal lives. In the words of Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, emotional competency (or emotional intelligence) determines "how leaders handle themselves and their relationships."<sup>1</sup>

Sterrett uses the acronym EQ to refer to one's emotional-intelligence quotient. She defines emotional intelligence as "the array of personal-management and social skills that allows one to succeed in the workplace and life in general." She goes on to suggest that EQ "encompasses intuition, character, integrity, and motivation."<sup>2</sup>

The word "emotional" sometimes sends the wrong signal, especially to those who make their careers in "rational environments" (i.e., in the sciences, engineering, and technology) and who may possess high levels of rational intelligence. They often equate "emotional" with "emoting" (i.e., displaying what they consider to be excessive emotion), and they believe that this behavior is inappropriate.

This is unfortunate because we are all born with both rational intelligence and emotional intelligence, and their balanced use would help improve things in our lives and in our organizations. Our emotional intelligence helps guide us when making decisions about what issues to avoid and what issues to approach. We sometimes call these "hunches" or "gut instinct." As we build lives and careers, we gather and presumably learn from our experiences. We also store away these experiences, and our hunches and instincts flow from these memories.

Our rational intelligence (cognition) helps guide us in matters related to thinking and planning, including questioning, gathering data, making decisions, and solving problems. Rational intelligence is fed by learning from experiences that are of a more structured, mechanistic nature.

Our rational and emotional intelligences are connected, and we draw upon both as we live our lives and make our way. Research shows, however, that our emotional responses to

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situations are somewhat faster than our rational, or thinking responses. The basis for this lies in our survival instinct: fight or flight. There are those who have learned to devalue or even disregard emotional responses as inappropriate in certain situations. I believe a worthy goal is to appreciate both emotional intelligence and rational intelligence, and learn to use both in order to make better decisions and live more effective and enjoyable lives.

The group of IT managers mentioned at the beginning of this article observed that the negative behaviors they witnessed tended to have long shelf lives. Several mentioned that the behaviors got hashed and rehashed, usually with embellishments added along the way. They became enshrined in the folklore of the organizational culture and did not make the building of positive relationships any easier. The group discussed the importance of “managing agreement” between the IT organization and its internal customers, and just about everyone agreed that emotional competency was a “must-have” competency for managing agreement both within the IT organization and beyond.

#### THE ROAD TO ABILENE

I told them the story of “the road to Abilene,” a.k.a. The Abilene Paradox. Perhaps you recall it. It is a classic description of how the lack of emotional competency derailed the managing of agreement within a family. Here is the story, in brief.

Four family members are sitting on their porch in front of a fan, drinking lemonade on a scorching hot and windy West Texas day. At the father’s suggestion, they decide to get in their car that had no air conditioning and make a 106-mile round trip over hot and dusty roads to Abilene to eat dinner in a greasy-spoon restaurant. Except for the father, none of the family wants to go; but after the father suggests it, the others fall into line. No one speaks up and questions the idea. After they return, hot, sweaty, dusty, and angry, a family fight erupts, and an already bad day becomes even worse — a family train wreck.

I am sure you have seen same thing happen in organizations. Here is the essence of what happens when teams and groups get “on the road to Abilene.”

A group is on the road to Abilene when it agrees to a course of action that most members of the group believe is foolish, stupid, or both. They adopt the course of action, with

predictable results. They wind up going somewhere they do not want to go and, by this course of action, succeed in making a difficult situation worse. The issue is not the inability of the team or group to manage conflict; it is their inability to manage agreement.

#### AVOIDING A TRIP TO ABILENE

What to do if you suddenly feel like you and your team are about to get on the road to Abilene? What aspects of emotional competency might you want to call upon to stop the journey and regroup? What would you need to know, understand, and be able to do, and what attitudes and values are essential for success?

In *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee describe “the four dimensions of emotional intelligence.” The first two dimensions — self-awareness and self-management — determine how we manage ourselves. The second two dimensions, social awareness and relationship management determine how we manage relationships with others. Each set of two dimensions includes nine individual competencies.

For purposes of this article, we look at one specific competency from each of the four dimensions, the lack of which I believe contributes to getting on the road to Abilene. It is also my experience that these competencies often are lacking or underutilized in workplaces and on teams, with the result that many of us spend far too much time traveling needlessly back and forth to Abilene.

I suggest that the following competencies either did not exist within the family or, for a combination of reasons, were underutilized:

- *Self-awareness or emotional self-awareness*: reading one’s own emotions and recognizing their potential impact upon others and upon situations; using “gut sense” to guide one’s own decisions.
- *Self-management or emotional self-control*: keeping one’s potentially disruptive emotions and impulses under control.
- *Social awareness and empathy*: sensing others’ emotions, understanding their perspectives and points of view, and taking active interest in their concerns.
- *Relationship management and conflict management*: recognizing, acknowledging, and attempting to manage or resolve disagreements.

## APPLYING THE FOUR DIMENSIONS TO LIFE AND CAREER

Here is how you might apply these four dimensions and related competencies to your own work or personal situations.

1. *Describe in detail your own “critical incident”*: a current or recent work situation (or personal situation, if you prefer) that did not turn out as well as you expected.
2. *Were there early warnings, red-flag behaviors, that were ignored?* For example, perhaps you or others perceived possible problems with some aspect of a project plan and were ignored or rebuffed in an attempt to discuss them. (Or, you may have decided for some reason not to even mention them.) Either way, the concerns were not dealt with, and later contributed to a project “train wreck.” Or, you observed team members, including yourself, spending more time discussing project concerns “offline” than during meetings. They would seldom express concerns during team meetings but would agree with whatever decisions were made. Sometimes, the decisions resulted in unintended negative consequences.
3. *Which of the four dimensions of emotional intelligence — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management — were either missing or underused in the incident, and how did this lack of competency contribute to the lack of success?*
4. *Identify things you and others could have done differently that might have helped your team avoid another unwanted trip to Abilene.* For example, act with integrity at all times. This is one of life’s greatest challenges because it means that our actions must square with our values. Be absolutely clear about your values, and be prepared mentally and physically to act upon them and live by them.

Understand that others probably will see things differently and we each have choices to

make about how we respond to these differences. By recognizing that while we may not be able to control the events that happen, we can control how we choose to respond to them. Of course, we will be called upon to take risks in defense of what we believe and what we value, and we may pay a price for acting with integrity. We may have to speak up and ask, “Why are we deciding to take this trip that may end up in a train wreck?” We may be amazed at what happens when we do.

### THE MUST-HAVE COMPETENCY

Emotional competency *is* the must-have competency. Technical competency gets us in the door. Business competency enables us to speak and understand the language of our customers. Interpersonal competency enables us to work effectively with our customers and colleagues. Emotional competency is the steering mechanism that enables us to tie together the other competencies and self-manage ourselves for maximum career and personal effectiveness.

### Notes

1. Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., and McKee, A., *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA, 2002, p. 6.
2. Sterrett, E.A., *The Manager’s Pocket Guide to Emotional Intelligence*, HRD Press, Amherst, MA, 2000, p. 2.

### Recommended Reading

- Goleman, Daniel, Boyatzis, Richard, and McKee, Annie, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2002.
- Harvey, Jerry B., *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1988.
- Manz, Charles C., *Emotional Discipline*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2003.
- Sterrett, Emily A., *The Manager’s Pocket Guide to Emotional Intelligence*, HRD Press, Amherst, MA, 2000.

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