



What is Competence?

By Jim Selman



Competence is more than a skill. It is the ability to make and keep promises.

I believe we can teach a skill, but need to coach people to be competent. In our work with individual clients and organizations, we stress the importance of having actions match commitments and not becoming trapped in conventional wisdom that can block our capacity to create possibilities and produce results.

Experience in the past three years which has called for coaching includes:

- Building executive alignment around a new corporate vision and strategy
- Transforming a top-heavy and paternalistic bureaucratic culture into a flat and competitive entrepreneurial environment
- Creating a new enterprise
- Major cost reduction
- Mobilization and enrollment of workforce relating to implementation of new work processes

- Coaching executives to lead initiatives to reduce time to market
- Coaching executives to facilitate merger of two previously competitive technical work groups

The following statements are examples of statements I use to provoke new thinking about each of the 14 areas of competency within an intention to reveal new distinctions for the client:

1. ‘**Cognitive Capacity**’ is not a function of the brain or IQ. It is closely related to another phenomenon called ‘cognitive blindness’. What you don’t know you don’t know is more important to developing cognitive power than what you do know.
2. ‘**Creativity**’ is a social phenomenon and suggests a different model of communication than we normally have available. Learning to be creative begins with learning to observe differently—learning to observe what is missing rather than what is wrong.
3. ‘**Visioning**’ isn’t having a picture of the future. It is creating the possibility of an unpredictable future that becomes a ground-of-being in the present.
4. ‘**Action Management**’ presupposes that you know what action is and can observe it. What actions are present when you are ‘managing’? Consider that all commitments are actions that can be observed and changed.



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5. **‘Organizational Awareness’**, like all awareness, isn’t descriptive. It is more like a sensibility to the context(s) within which our awareness is occurring.

6. **‘Teamwork’** is mostly a ‘red herring’ used to cover up an unwillingness to talk straight about a lot of basic issues such as a lack of trust and our incompetence in coordinating actions in a complex environment. When great teams are working, there is never any discussion of teamwork...just working together.

7. **‘Partnering’** is a way of relating, a way of listening, an assessment of our commitments to each other and the world. What is important is what are our practices as partners for dealing with breakdowns.

8. **‘Interpersonal Relations’** is a description of human practices in relationships. All relationships are interpersonal. The question is do our practices for relating produce satisfaction and results consistent with what we say we’re about?

9. **‘Communication’** is something that everyone agrees is important. Consider, however, that in spite of this and billions spent to improve communication, there is very little evidence that people in general communicate any better than they ever have. Perhaps the problem is that there is a flaw in our everyday notions about communication. Maybe communication has less to do with exchanging and understanding information than it has to do with commitment.

10. **‘Stamina/Stress Resistance’** is another description that can (and does) obscure what is really going on when we feel stress. Science has proven that physiologically there is no difference between ‘eustress’ (good) and ‘distress’ (bad). The difference seems to be in our interpretation of the experience and the

context in which it occurs. Having a breakthrough in this area also involves a transformation in how we relate to whatever it is that we say is causing our stress.

11. **‘Ethics and Values’** are probably one of the two or three most important issues to consider in a post-modern world in which circumstantial change is accelerating and uncertainty is becoming a norm. This discussion begins with the question of personal responsibility and choice about ‘who one is’ in the organization.

12. **‘Personality’**, like style or charisma, is less important than we typically think if we can listen generously and build a culture based more on commitment than assessment.

13. **‘Behavioral Flexibility’** assumes we have a choice about our behavior. Normally we don’t. Behavior is a function of how we see the world. We do have a choice about that. We need to learn to observe in a way in which flexibility is natural and easy—like dancing.

14. **‘Self-Confidence’** is a product of taking a stand for ‘who we are’ and what we are committed to in life. It isn’t about how we feel, our moods, or what we think.