Creating a Successful Competency-Based Performance Management System
Guide for Replication

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (A-B Tech) uses the SEEDS approach (Select – Expect – Evaluate – Develop - Strategic) through its Competency-Based Performance Management System. This methodical approach consists of competency-based interview questions, competency expectations, performance evaluations, and aligned professional development that supports our strategic plan objectives.

As a result, A-B Tech has been able to take intentional steps towards supporting employees in improving performance in targeted competencies areas. The College has documented improvements in performance, increases in employee engagement in professional development, and improved effectiveness of professional development. This innovative and intentional process has proven to support the faculty and staff in reaching higher performance, thereby improving institutional effectiveness.

The development of A-B Tech’s competency-based performance management system began in Fall 2010 and our first official version of College Competencies were introduced to the Campus in the Fall 2011. Since then, each year additional components of the performance management system have been implemented. Based on our experience and lessons learned, this is our recommendation for replicating a similar system at another institution.

**Recommended Steps for Replication**

1. **Institutional Commitment**

   Before starting the project to develop a competency-based performance management system, having the College leadership’s agreement on the need for the program as well as the support to commit resources of time, personnel, and money is imperative.

   Some specific considerations include:
   - Based on the size and structure of the institution: Assess the costs/benefits between the program in which you aspire versus the program in which your institution needs and is capable of sustaining. Consider overall return-on-investment. Determine which components of the performance management system can be adopted and when.
   - What financial resources are available to purchase and administer a software solution for performance evaluations and for learning management?
   - What is a realistic timeline to expect, taking into account other campus-wide initiatives?
Consider the best approach to the initiative based on your institution’s culture. This replication guide is based on A-B Tech’s experiences. Your institutional needs and culture may require modification.

2. Identify Ownership

Although it is a cross-divisional effort, a department/division should be identified to own and sustain the program. These types of programs are often found in Human Resources.

Consider incorporating the responsibilities into one or more person's job description. Developing and sustaining the competency-based performance management system takes time. Having the responsibilities recognized in a job description(s) communicates its importance.

Some specific considerations include:

- What department/division is most appropriate to lead the project and own the long-term administration of the program?
- Does this department/division have the talent and personnel time to commit to this project?
- Whose role would be most influenced by the program? Do they have the skills to develop, implement, and sustain the program? Skills needed include: organizational development, project management, consensus building, software administration, and knowledge of human resources, specifically performance management.

3. Recruit a Cross-Divisional Task Force

Identify inviting and skilled leaders, staff, faculty, and administrators who bring varied perspectives, are not afraid of change, are sensitive to the institutional culture, and are passionately committed to the College. The commitment for the Task Force could range from three months to two years, depending on the breadth of responsibility. Task Forces only developing competencies will likely require less time. Task Forces revising the performance management tools (performance evaluations, performance improvement plans, etc.) will likely require more time.

It is important to include several employees who are knowledgeable of human resources, performance management, organizational development, and perhaps have experience with competency-based systems. However, it is equally important to include as many (or more) members who simply represent the College community and have the talents to learn basics about best practices in those areas as the project develops.
Some specific considerations include:

- Do the task force members identified have the time to commit to a complex long-term project which is outside of their primary job duties?
- Before the Task Force first meets, define the breadth of their role. Is the Task Force only responsible for creating competencies? Or are they also involved in the development/revision of the performance evaluation process, aligning the competencies with professional development, etc.?
- Consider if the Task Force could or should form sub-committees to support their efforts.
- Define Leadership’s expectations of the Task Force to report on progress (frequency, timeline, etc.).
- To prevent “scope creep” clarify the boundaries of what the Task Force is not responsible for.

4. **Communicate with Campus**

Communicating regularly with faculty and staff about the project helps them anticipate the changes and removes suspicions when they learn their colleagues are on a special “Performance Management Task Force”. Assure them that information will be provided as the project develops and they will have opportunities to provide input via focus groups, etc.

Select one spokesperson for the communication to ensure one consistent voice throughout the implementation process. This spokesperson is likely the person identified to take ownership over the program and should be available to employees for questions, and support, throughout the implementation.

Some specific considerations include:

- Is your institutional culture prone to resist change? If so, approaching the process with sensitivity will be important to ensure acceptance.

5. **Develop College Competencies and Role-Based Competencies**

The development of the College’s competencies is the foundation for all other components of the performance management process. Pull samples from other institutions (like A-B Tech) and organizations (private industry, etc.). Start with a library of samples. Then, the Task Force should identify competencies that are believed to be most important to the institution as core competencies.

A-B Tech chose to also develop “Standards of Professional Conduct”, which enable the College’s Core Competencies to focus on true abilities and not be co-mingled with basic of expectations of employment (like dependability).
When developing role-based competencies, first define the key roles of the institution. Keep in mind, the more roles that are included, the more complex the performance management system becomes.

Some specific considerations include:
- Does your institution need Role-Based competencies in addition to Core Competencies?
- Would basic Standards of Conduct be beneficial on your performance evaluations and in setting expectations with employees?
- What sister institutions or other organizations could you request samples of their Competencies?

6. **Align Professional Development with the Competencies**

   Assuming a professional/faculty development program already exists at the institution, the process of aligning competencies is fairly straightforward. In some cases, the competencies act as a criteria in determining if a topic is worthy of being considered professional development (for example, is “Stress Management” or “Managing Your Mortgage” considered professional development?).

   Some specific considerations include:
   - How does your institution manage the registration, calendaring, and communication of professional development? A Learning Management System (LMS)? Or a web-based calendar? How will you incorporate the communication of the alignment of the trainings with competencies in this system?
   - If you do not currently use a LMS, consider selecting and implementing a LMS with strong reporting capabilities. In some cases, the LMS may be able to work with the online performance evaluation system (see 8.2. of this document).

7. **Communicate Competencies and Professional Development with Campus**

   Employees should be informed and trained on the new competencies prior to or at the start of the new evaluation cycle. Ensure employees know which role-based competencies apply to them, if appropriate. Explain that although the new evaluation process is still being revised, the competencies will be the basis for the evaluation. Be thoughtful and sensitive in delivery of this communication - employees get nervous about performance evaluations.

   Approach communications from the viewpoint that the process is being improved to more effectively support the faculty/staff and their professional development. Communicating regularly about each phase and the impact of the phase, will help prepare the employees for a smoother integration.

   Introduce training opportunities, tied to the competencies, to support the employees in their professional development. Provide adequate training opportunities for supervisors to support this process.
Some specific considerations include:

- Historically has your institution engaged in dismissals and non-renewals frequently enough that employees may be concerned, or even paranoid, that a new competency-based system could threaten their job security? If so, consider taking extra steps to alleviate concerns such having open Q&A sessions, adding more focus groups, and asking for volunteers to pilot the new program. Approach the process with the mindset that “everyone is learning this together”.

8. **Evaluate and Revise the Performance Evaluation Form and Process**

The performance evaluation system is at the core of performance management. The options for how to approach performance evaluations are broad and should be unique to each institution. General sub-steps in this process include:

1. A cross-divisional team (the Task Force or a Sub-Committee):
   a. Solicit samples from other institutions and organizations.
   b. Gather information on best practices.
   c. Assess strengths and weaknesses of the former system.
   d. Draft the content of the new form.
   e. Draft steps in the new process.
2. A smaller project team (possibly includes Information Technology):
   a. Review and select an online software solution to support the form and process.
   b. Implement the new form and process via the software. (Note: New software implementations may take 12-24 weeks to complete.)
   c. Pilot the new process/form or gather feedback from focus groups and revise prior to implementing across campus.

Some specific considerations include:

- When defining the performance evaluation process, how many supervisors should be included in the evaluation?
- What topics should be discussed between employee/supervisor during the evaluation? For example: credentials, professional development, career aspirations, challenges to their role, updates to job description, etc.
- When selecting a performance management system, what reporting capabilities will you require from the new system? What metrics will need to be in the reports?
- What should the Information Technology’s involvement be in the implementation process?
- Who will administer the new software? Information Technology? Human Resources?
- How will the data integrity of your core system College Information System impact the integration with the new system?
- Depending on size of college, software system needs to be flexible, simple, and sustainable.
9. **Communicate & Train on the New Performance Evaluation System**

Keep employees informed of the development of the new performance evaluation system. Once available, offer extensive training face-to-face, online tutorials, and via open labs. Employees will be nervous about the new content and process. Provide a wide range of trainings and reference tools (FAQs, guides, etc.) to support the employees through the process.

Reiterate that this is a learning process for everyone, including leadership. Although poor performance will not be ignored, everyone (including supervisors) are encouraged to be flexible throughout the process (relax deadlines on the completion of the forms, exercise patience with one another, etc.).

Some specific considerations include:
- How comfortable is the College community with software-based applications? What challenges has the College faced when implementing similar software systems in the past?
- Do the employees prefer face-to-face or online training or both? What resources are needed to ensure a breadth of training options are made available?
- Do all of your employees have easy computer access (consider Groundskeepers, Security, Custodial Staff)? If not, consider open computer labs with technical support to help them through the process.

10. **Get Feedback**

After the first performance evaluation cycle listen to your employees. Hold focus groups, conduct surveys, and solicit feedback. The program will gain more support and credibility when faculty and staff are involved in the process and see their opinions are being incorporated in steps to continuously improve.

Evaluate feedback from an organizational perspective – what may seem to be a great idea for improvement for one area of the college could negatively impact another. Some feedback may simply indicate updates to the campus training on the evaluation process is needed rather than changing the evaluation process itself.

Some specific considerations include:
- Consider the most effective method for gaining feedback at your institution. In some cultures, focus groups are effective whereas in other cultures surveys are more appropriate.
- Invite key stakeholders to the feedback process – including your greatest cheerleaders and your strongest cynics.
11. Evaluate and Revise other Performance Management Components

The competencies serve as the basis for all other performance management tools. Once the professional development and performance evaluations are aligned with the competencies, all other performance management components should be evaluated. Things to consider may include:
  - Job descriptions
  - Employment screening criteria
  - Coaching underperforming employee documents
  - Career planning/Succession planning
  - Strategic Plan & Objectives

Some specific considerations include:
  - Should this task be part of the Task Force? A set of sub-committees from the Task Force? Or handled via the department/division that owns the new program?
  - After key changes and implementations, consider gathering feedback via focus groups and surveys to continuously improve.

12. Get Support from A-B Tech

Contact the Human Resources & Organizational Development staff at A-B Tech for any questions, samples, or support.

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This guide for replication is based on A-B Tech’s system and the lessons learned. For an institution of our size and culture, we found a system that works best for our College. However, each institution will be best served to modify the replication process to suit their objectives and culture.

A-B Tech is enthusiastic about sharing best practices, samples, advice, and support to any institution interested in developing a Competency-Based Performance Management System. For any higher education institution, this program will undoubtedly improve institutional effectiveness. By improving our College’s institutional effectiveness through the development of this system, we offer other institutions an opportunity to do the same and positively impact their future performance.