

Why Competency Framework? Isn't SOP enough?

By Dr Uwe H Kaufmann

Spending some days in Nanjing, the former capital of China, is enjoyable. People are nice, work is fun, food is outstanding and my hotel is awesome. Nowadays, the service in most hotels in China is world class.

Monday morning I make my way to the restaurant, expecting my usual sumptuous breakfast. I am greeted with a smile and with the usual dialogue:

“Good morning, sir. Your room number, please” requests the waitress with a sweet smile. I answer 1326.

“Smoker or non-smoker?” I opt for the first one.

“Tea or Coffee?” I answer this one as well and start toasting my bread.

On Tuesday morning, it is nice to meet the same waitress with the same sweet smile.

“Good morning, sir. Your room number, please” she wants to know again. I did not expect her to remember, of course.

“Smoker or non-smoker?” I answer as well.

“Tea or Coffee?” I answer this one, irritated.

Wednesday morning the same waitress, the same questions.

On Thursday and Friday exactly the same procedure.

I am very sure it was always the same girl. And, I am very sure I was always myself staying in the same room, being violent non-smoker who always likes coffee with milk in the morning. And I would bet she must have recognised me from Tuesday onwards. I just assume she was following her procedure and was not willing to think one step beyond.

She knew her procedure. No doubt. Even with a smile. However, I gave her a not so pleasant rating when I checked out. She was the wrong person for the job.

A friend mentioned the following story to me.

She arrived in her hotel in Myanmar on Sunday in order to work the following week. The hotel was ok. It was clean and nice but not really comparable to hotels she was used to. She went for breakfast on Monday morning and was greeted by the waiter. The waiter asked the usual questions that seemed to come from the worldwide handbook for hotel waiters. This waiter, dressed in a not perfectly clean suit, was not too busy so that he started a small talk with my friend.

“How did you sleep”, was one of his questions – in starter English. And my friend hesitated but replied truthfully that her night was not that good. Just by the way, she mentioned that her pillow was too hard.

When she returned from her client meeting, she was truly surprised. On her bed she found two additional pillows with different height and filling. Exactly what she needed. I am sure this little deed resulted in a nice tip for the waiter upon check-out.

We do not know what the SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) for the waiter in this hotel says – if they have an SOP. I do not believe it instructs him to do what he did for my friend. If he got an SOP it was surely for waiters, not for chamber maids.

SOPs describe how a task has to be performed – often step by step. Competencies describe knowledge and skills needed to perform this task. Additionally, they formulate requirements towards attitudes to apply knowledge and skills. Competencies describe WHAT it takes to complete a job successfully with the “HOW” to do it. This HOW is of less importance when the job is

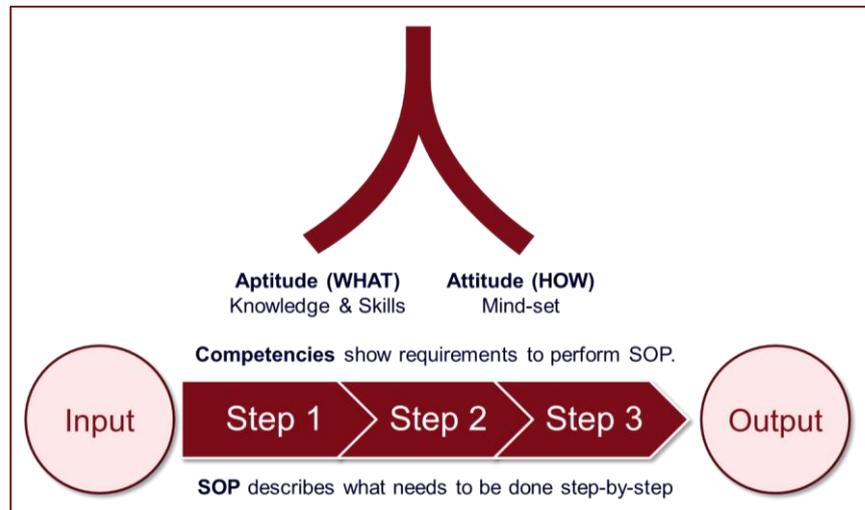


Figure 1: SOP and Competency Framework together delivering results

about repairing a car, for example. However, it is of paramount significance if the performance has to be shown in the service line of business.

SOPs and competencies combined can help delivering the best results. Job competencies often take over the instructional task of SOPs in case SOPs are lacking substance or don't exist at all. If it serves the purpose, why not?

Performance is achieved through application of knowledge and skills with the right attitude. The waitress in Nanjing did her job, but was lacking exactly this attitude whereas the waiter in this second class hotel in Yangon did. He displayed competencies we could summarise with Customer Orientation, Collaboration and Teamwork as well as Alignment with Organisational Values.

He sincerely listened to customer needs and translated them into actions. This attitude is completely unlike the usual “How are you?” for which no one really wants an answer. Furthermore, he showed a great degree of Collaboration and Teamwork by helping his colleagues to satisfy their customer needs – beyond his own scope of work. And, he exhibited his organisational values, probably without even knowing.

His mind-set made the difference between poor rating and commendation by customers.