Core Competencies
The Big Hitters

Introduction

The quest over the last 25 years has been to understand what differentiates outstanding from average performers. This has led us to conduct a vast range of studies across different managerial levels and occupational groups. A summary of the range of projects we have been involved in is provided in table 1.

Our approach has been to compare outstanding performers with average performers and to analyse what accounts for the differences in performance. In practical terms, this means individuals who are considered to be at the top of their game in terms of delivery are compared to those who are average in what they deliver. The performance indicators have to be outcome deliverables and therefore, measureable. For example, one could consider an outstanding chemical plant manager whose plant has measurably higher efficiency and productivity, better safety performance, and/or more effective trade union relationships than his average plant manager counterpart. Another example might be the comparison within a call centre environment where the outstanding call centre operative achieves measurably greater sales and service delivery than their average counterpart. Finally, an outstanding chief executive will be associated with a business that is more profitable, innovative and higher in growth than their counterpart, average chief executive.

These studies all share the characteristic of being carried out 'blind'. By blind we mean that researchers were unaware which individuals were outstanding performers and which were average performers at the time of investigation. All participants were interviewed in the same structured way and their data analysed. Outstanding and average performers were then revealed in order to sort the data before further analysis was carried out to assess what differentiates the two groups.

It is fair to say that the only consistent differentiating factors that we have observed have been measurable behaviours, as obtained through detailed behavioural event interviewing. Table 2 shows an example of what we mean by these behaviours. In essence, what we are saying is that if

The Chief Executive	The Custodial Banker
The Executive Director	The Retail Banker
The CFO or FD	The Food Scientist (chocolate to be precise!)
The HR Director	The Physicist
The CIO	The Chemical Engineering Plant Manager
The IT Director	The Chemical Plant Manager
The Customer Service Director	The Contact Centre Team Leader
The Corporate Banker	The Contact Centre Advisor
The Investment Fund Manager	The Factory Supervisor
The Trust Fund Manager	The Mechanical and Electrical Engineer
The Accountant	The Vicar
The Sales Director	The Marketeer
The Salesman	Etc ...

Table 1: A summary of the specific types of roles and groupings where we have conducted research

Competency	Meaning
Initiative	Acts before being directed
Results Focus	Sets clear objectives for self and others in order to achieve an intended outcome
Concern For Impact	Modifies and adapts their approach with others in order to gain their commitment to a particular course of action

Table 2: Examples of the behaviours assessed in behavioural event interviewing

you measure or assess the outstanding performers and the average performers in terms of the frequency and power in which they deliver the behaviours shown in table 2, the superior performing group shows them to be statistically significantly more present than in the average group.

What this research shows is simple: if you have a recruitment process that assesses people against these behaviours then you are likely to stand a greater chance of selecting the superior performers who will deliver more for your organisation. Further, if you help any individual to get better at these behaviours then you are likely to achieve an enhancement in terms of the extent to which that individual delivers to the bottom line. Put simply, the call centre operative with greater results focus and concern for impact will sell more product and leave the customer more satisfied. The chemical engineering plant manager will deliver a more efficient and safe operations environment and the chief

executive will deliver to the share holders a more profitable business. The evidence that shows this linkage is very clear.

The evidence indicating the linkage between these performance outcomes and other factors such as educational background is very unclear. We have found no evidence that educational background and academic performance seriously differentiates average from outstanding performers. In one study of engineers we compared degree classification with performance in the job. In the study we observed upper second graduates slightly better than the rest but no significant differences between first, lower second and third class graduates. We found a similar correlation with these groupings' A-level grades.

The bottom line is simple across all levels and occupational groups. It is the possession of behavioural competencies that drives organisational performance.

Competencies and Job Analysis

Job analysis clearly has great benefit in that it seeks to identify the tasks and activities that are required by a role; it helps an individual to understand how their accountabilities are underpinned by their objectives and the tasks required to deliver their objectives. This of course defines what needs to be achieved. It fails to articulate the difference between outstanding and average performance and define how the individual needs to behave to up their performance.

The benefit of our approach is that it builds on job analysis by providing a model of what true effectiveness looks like in the

job. Further, it enables individual measurement against the competency model that allows a performance management process to be effectively implemented.

Job Analysis provides a very necessary and essential description of what needs to be done. In this sense it provides a degree of clarity for the individual about their role. It does not however go far enough in helping to define for the individual what excellence might look like in the pursuit of their objectives.

Which Competencies are the Big Hitters?

Table two shows a generic example of a range of different competency types. Depending on occupational group and the level on which we are focusing, the competencies in the framework differ. We believe however that there is a set of Big Hitter competencies or behaviours that we could refer to as a core competency framework. These are summarised in table 3 and the following provides a brief illustration of what these behaviours mean.

Competency
Analytical Thinking
Conceptual Thinking
Interpersonal Awareness
Concern For Impact
Initiative
Results Focus
Independence
Tenacity

Table 3: The core competencies or 'Big Hitters'

Analytical Thinking

- "David wanted to make sure he was making the right decision about who to promote; he'd received bits of feedback from others in the organisation but he was concerned he was missing something important. David identified a range of performance indicators, collected data for all of the candidates and used this to make an objective comparison between them. After making the decision he continued collecting data on the individuals involved and was able to determine two things. Firstly, whether he'd made the right decision and secondly, who were the best candidates for future promotions".

David's desire to dig deeper into the performance of his potential candidates showed strong evidence of Analytical Thinking. He logically thought through how he would assess the candidates and collected data. Further data collection allowed him to analyse and assess the quality of his decision.

Conceptual Thinking

- "When Sylvia was appointed as Director of Manufacturing, her first priority was to look at the issue of lost-time accidents and our poor safety performance, which had dogged many of our industrial units. She saw this as a serious issue both in terms of the well-being of our people as well as the substantial cost and reputation issues that safety represents. She really appreciated the threat to our business in terms of our licence to operate if we didn't improve matters. Additionally, she also recognised the broad range of causal factors that were likely to be underpinning the safety issues. Apart from inadequate technical know-how, she identified how a range of other features including leadership, employee relations issues, and our relationship with the local community were probably linked together as a conglomerate of factors that needed to be addressed."

Sylvia demonstrates her Conceptual Thinking firstly by recognising the breadth of the issue in terms of safety affecting the business's economic performance and reputation and, secondly, by appreciating that the causes of the issues were not down to simple, unilateral factors but were, in fact, a more complex combination of factors that undermined safety performance: she saw the bigger picture and the inter-linkages.

Inter-personal Awareness

- "The person to go and ask about how the land lies is definitely Richard. He just seems to have a very good handle on what makes folk tick. The other week I had a conversation with him about one of our colleagues in the sales department. It was so useful to hear his insight about the person in question that I saw that person in a different light regarding their probable ulterior motives."

Richard shows his Inter-personal Awareness by providing to his colleague a really useful insight about the concerns, drivers and motives of another person.

Concern for Impact

- "Sometimes I am amazed with Jane's skill in getting people to see things her way. Last year she made a presentation to the engineering department about the need for them to align their activities carefully in terms of the organisation's marketing and sales activities. When she presented her argument she described it in such a way using facts and figures that it seemed to really appeal to those guys. She absolutely got them on board by how she made her input."

Jane demonstrates her Concern for Impact by positioning her argument in a certain way that captured the imagination of the engineers and got them to do what the business required.

Initiative

- *"When John started in the organisation in his new role, he recognised that there was a need for clear investment to be made in order to maximise the output of the plant. Off his own bat, he set about identifying the critical machinery that needed to be changed, and sought the requisite investment funding. Then he got the team together in order to deliver his required changes."*

Here John demonstrates initiative because he did something without being told, which added value and resulted in a positive outcome for the business.

Results Focus

- *"I have known Stephen for many years and one thing you can rely on is his ability to deliver on time and on cost. The last time he took on a project, he established a clear plan which included mutually agreed objectives for each member of the project team. As well, he put in place contingencies in case things went wrong. He delivered a clear drive in order to make progress and aligned and co-ordinated everyone's activities to ensure that the job got done."*

Stephen demonstrated results focus because he had a clear outcome in mind and established clear objectives for those around him. This behaviour ensured an effective, on-time, on-cost delivery.

Independence

- *"Jackie is a good member of the team to have on board. While she has a nice manner about her, what is really useful is that she lets you know what she really thinks. Last year, my FD and I were both really committed to a new line of funding we had agreed with our bankers about which we were soon to go public. In the light of this, Jackie suspected we would be pretty annoyed if she disagreed with us but she had the courage to raise her concerns with me in a very clear way. She did this firstly because she thought we were wrong and, secondly,*

because she thought it was an issue that could not go on unremarked. I must admit at the time I was irritated but soon after her intervention I began to realise what a great input she had made and how right she was."

It is so useful for a CEO to have someone like Jackie in the team. Jackie is prepared to give her views about very critical issues even though she knows it is risky for her. In this example, Jackie's tendency not to curry favour but to say it as it is eventually enabled the CEO to avoid a disastrous funding decision.

Tenacity

- *"The thing about Sarah is that she never gives up. Indeed I don't know if you know this, but prior to joining the organisation she completed her Marketing Diploma which, in itself, is clearly an achievement. It was breathtaking to see her overcome balancing her work and home commitments on top of her college studies. She brings that same type of drive and determination to her current role. Indeed, she seems almost motivated when things get in the way."*

This highlights Sarah's Tenacity to show drive and energy to overcome a difficult set of obstacles and set-backs through repeated efforts in order to deliver the performance outcome.

This grouping represents a core competency framework that tends to be generic across all roles and is reflective of a very simple feature. The two competencies of Conceptual and Analytical Thinking relate to an individual's capacity to know what needs to be done and to understand the complexity of the issues they are dealing with. They are fundamental to what we call the Thinking category. The two competencies relating to Concern for Impact and Interpersonal Awareness reflect an individual's competency to engage with people and can be referred to as the Influencing category. The two competencies labelled Results Focus and Initiative relate to the individual's capacity to introduce new ideas and get the job done and we can refer to these as the Achieving category; they are delivery behaviours. Finally, the two competencies labelled Independence and Tenacity relate to the individual's ability to manage themselves and show discipline and drive. We can refer to these as the Self-managing competencies. Table 4 illustrates this core framework.

Category	Competency	Behaviour
Thinking	**Analytical**	Logically thinks through a problem in detail, developing clear criteria for decision-making
	Conceptual	Thinks broadly about what is occurring in the world to help generate more creative and imaginative solutions to problems and issues
Influencing	**Interpersonal Awareness**	Seeks to understand the concerns, drivers and motives of others
	Concern For Impact	Modifies and adapts their approach with others in order to gain their commitment to a particular course of action
Achieving	**Initiative**	Acts before being directed
	Results Focus	Sets clear objectives for self and others in order to achieve an intended outcome
Self-Managing	**Independence**	Surfaces difficult issues with others in the face of clear opposition
	Tenacity	Demonstrates repeated effort to overcome obstacles and difficulties

Table 4: The Big Hitter competency framework
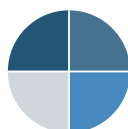
Links to Leadership

Let's refer to how these Big Hitters as we call them may relate to the idea of leadership. Leadership as a topic is underpinned by vast amounts of writing and research. In order to simplify all this complex material we articulate a simple nine box model that we believe characterises the leadership process. In essence we take three core themes of leadership. Firstly the idea of Vision, secondly the idea of Network and thirdly the idea of Realisation. Put simply, leaders need to know what needs to be done, secondly they need to get people on board to those ideas and thirdly, they need to manage themselves and others in order to realise their ideas and deliver outcomes.

We put these three concepts together in a nine box model illustrated in figure 1 with Vision, Network, Realisation across the top and Vision, Network, Realisation down the side of the model. Good leadership will involve a journey running through boxes one to nine. Let's illustrate the process.

Box number one is Visioning the Vision; we can simply refer here to the idea of an individual who thinks about what needs to be done. The good leader then moves into box two which is Networking the Vision. Put simply, the leader tests out their idea with significant others. If they achieve a positive reaction they'll move into box three which is a realisation phase: Realising the Vision. This is about the individual creating an agenda or plan in their mind of what needs to happen next.

The stage is then set to move into box four which is Visioning the Networking process. Put simply, the individual here thinks about and reflects what needs to happen in their influencing process. When successfully completed the good leader moves into box five, which is Networking the Network. This means the individual actually engaging with others in order to more specifically gain agreement to what needs to be done. Once this is achieved the next stage of our process is box number six, to Realise that Network. In other words to secure commitment from other people, gaining their buy in and cooperation to get the job done.

Moving out of the Networking phase enables us to move into box seven (this is often where people start their change process, however, here it is stage seven). Box seven is Visioning the Realisation process which is where the individual sits down, thinks about and plans in a detailed fashion what needs to happen. Box number seven prepares the ground

	Vision	Networking	Realisation
Vision	**1** Visioning the Vision: thoughts for the future	**2** Networking the Vision: plan/vision	**3** Realising the Vision: planning & critical path analysis
Networking	**4** Visioning the Network: Test ideas with others	**5** Networking the Network: Interaction	**6** Realising the Network: Managing the actual delivery
Realisation	**7** Visioning the Realisation: develop options & agenda	**8** Networking the Realisation: secure commitment	**9** Realising the Realisation: monitor & evaluate delivery

Figure 1: The Nine Box Model

for action to take place and here we enter the realms of box eight which is the networking phase of getting the job done. The leader engages with people in one-to-one and group situations in order to ensure the activities are completed. The final box of the model, box nine, labelled Realising the Realisation process, essentially boils down to the individual evaluating the effectiveness of the realisation process.

We have found this nine box model useful to help people think in a conceptual way about what leadership is and about how the process of change needs to happen. The Big Hitters competency framework entirely fits into this model

where we can see the Thinking competencies dominating in the Visioning phase with the Influencing and Achieving set providing support. It will be the Influencing competencies that dominate in the Networking phase with Thinking and Achievement providing support. The Realisation stage of the nine box model is strongly underpinned by the Achieving competencies but with the Influencing and Thinking providing support. Self management are those behaviours that relate to persistence and self discipline and therefore will underpin all aspects of this process. Table 5 illustrates this process.

Leadership Theme	Vision	Network	Realisation
Primary Competency Category	Thinking	Influencing	Achieving
Secondary Competency Category	Influencing	Thinking	Thinking
	Achieving	Achieving	Influencing
Tertiary Competency Category	Self-Managing	Self-Managing	Self-Managing

Table 5: Competencies underpinning leadership

Summary

In summary, what we are saying is that based on research with many thousands of outstanding and average performers across a wide range of organisations and occupational groups we have found it is behaviours that differentiate performance. All of these studies generate comprehensive sets of behaviours, all of which are useful and important for the individual to develop. However, cutting through the complexity is the idea of a simple, Big Hitting set of

behaviours that comprise a core competency framework that is generic and will apply whether we are talking about a call centre operative or the chief executive of a large conglomerate. These behaviours are fundamental and underpin the essential capability and potential of how an individual thinks, influences, delivers results and exhibits the toughness and discipline required for high performance.