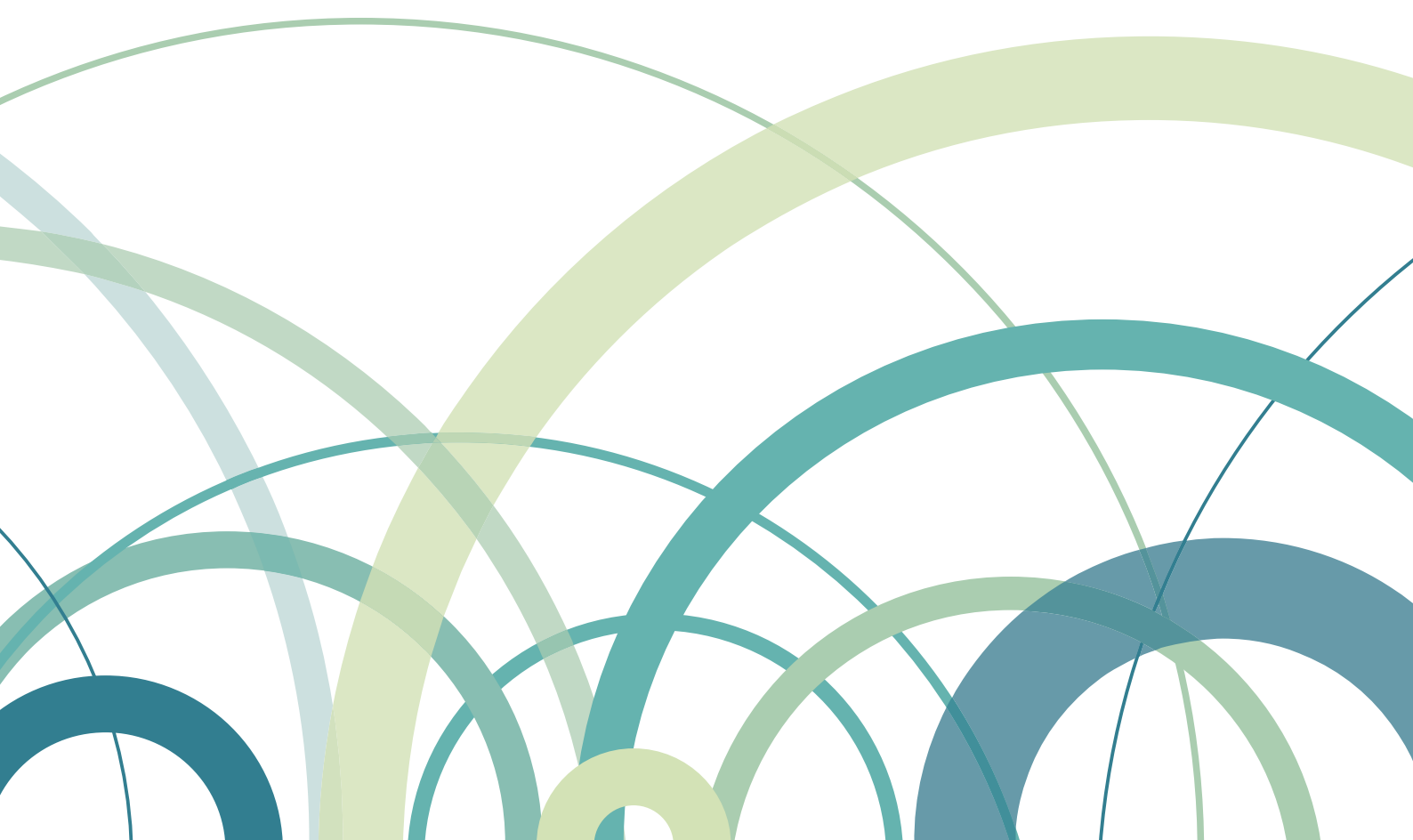


Building project management capability through competency assessments

Author

Melanie Franklin, Chief Executive,
Maven Training Limited



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Competency models emerged in the 1980s as a response to organisational change and are now an accepted part of management development. In many organisations they form the backbone of the performance management and recruitment processes. There are a myriad of best practice models available to organisations but their value is greatest when they are tailored to the vision, mission and culture of the particular organisation.

In the last couple of years there has been the development of specific models for specific skill sets. For example the NHS has developed its own skills and competencies framework to include clinical and non-clinical specialisms, the Change Management Institute has developed a competency model for change practitioners, the Association for Project Managers has a model for project, programme and portfolio management and there are competency models for those working in finance, IT and training. In the UK many organisations have contributed to the creation of National Occupational Standards for different industry sectors, from which industry specific competencies can be derived.

'Competencies' are the behaviours that employees must have, or must acquire, to input into a situation in order to achieve high levels of performance.'

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2010

These behaviours have been identified as the ones that most make a difference to job performance and they are derived from observing 'superior' performers to identify the differences in how they behave compared to 'adequate' performers. Individuals use a combination of people-centred behaviours (referred to as management or leadership competencies) and technical competencies which are specific to the skill set that they use. An effective competency model must assess management and technical competencies.

This paper explains how to develop and apply a competency model that address the competencies required for the effective implementation of change through portfolio, programme and project management thereby increasing the capability of an organisation to successfully achieve its strategic objectives.

Effective implementation of change requires that an organisation has the capability to:

- Assess its strategic objectives and define the portfolio of projects and activities that will lead to the achievement of each objective
- Form implementation teams skilled in the delivery of change (projects) and the transition of core business from business as usual to a new version of business as usual:
 - Deliver projects on time, on budget and to the required level of quality
 - Implement the new systems, processes, products and services created by each project using a structured approach ensuring that the day to day operations are not destabilised by change and that individuals support the changes and are willing and able to adopt them.

The benefits derived from the appropriate use of a competency model for the successful implementation of change can be defined based on how the model is applied. The two most common applications of a competency model are for recruitment, selection and talent management, and as a development tool used by individuals and their line managers.

The benefits of using a competency model for recruitment purposes include:

- Establishment of clear expectations of what the organisation expects and needs from an individual
- Reduction in the costs of the recruitment and retention of staff as there is an increase in retention and a reduction in the number of 'failed' candidates who leave in the first year
- Talent pool is not diluted with insufficiently able recruits
- Increase in productivity as the proportion of superior performers increases
- Provision of objective selection criteria which minimise legal challenges to the recruitment process (grievances, tribunals)

The benefits of using regular competency assessment for staff development include provision of:

- A roadmap for building strengths and closing development gaps
- Career paths that include lateral and vertical moves to increase the range of opportunities across the organisation
- Help in developing a 'learning organisation' – consciously transforming and developing

Thereby enabling:

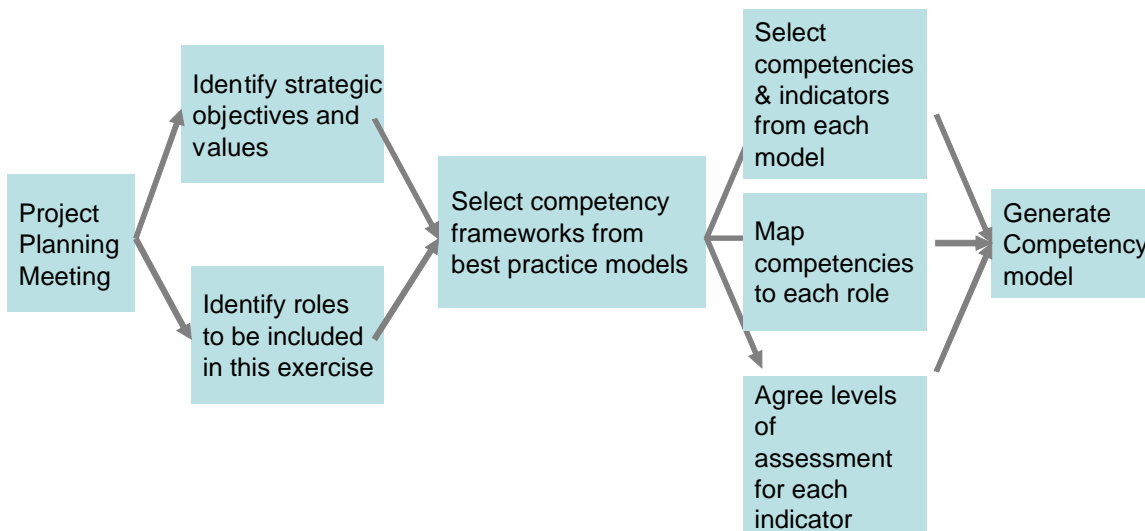
- An increase in the pool of highly skilled internal resources
- Greater production efficiency through the alignment of appropriately skilled resources to each change initiative
- Enhanced employee morale and a reduction in recruitment and retention costs
- Increased rate of return on all development activities
- Better quality outcomes and an increase in customer satisfaction

Development of a competency model should be undertaken in isolation from other governance structures and development procedures that are already in existence. To create a competency model with the best fit for the organization means understanding the prevailing culture and values of that organization, alongside its ambitions and the vision it has of what it will become in the future.

We believe there are three steps to the process:

- Create competency model
- Launch competency model
- Apply competency model

Create competency model



Project planning meeting

Development of a competency framework is run as a project with an agreed timeline, budget and set of resources. The purpose of the planning meeting is to confirm the scope and objectives of this project including the strategic and operational reasons for developing the model, the stakeholders, the anticipated benefits and the risks and likely issues that will arise.

Identify strategic objectives and values

A competency model is most effective if the competencies that it assesses are relevant to the industry sector, ambitions that the organisation has and the prevailing culture and values that those already working in the organisation demonstrate. The indicators which demonstrate each competency will be influenced by these values. For example if quality is a prevailing theme in the values of the organisation then testing, reviewing, checking and getting approval from stakeholders will be important examples of competency.

Identify roles to be included in this exercise

Roles may refer to management levels to which the competency model applies, or disciplines or specialisms that are to be included. Generally a competency model is applicable to all levels of management; it is the level of ability that increases with grade, but the competencies are core to the organisation whatever the seniority of the person being assessed.

There is a balance to be achieved in creating a model that is reflective of all the skills required to implement successful change and being so broad as to ignore specific skills that are only held by certain roles. Effectively the scope of the model must be confirmed at this point, balancing its inclusiveness and the number of staff to whom it is applicable against the need to make it specific enough to be meaningful.

Select competency frameworks from best practice models

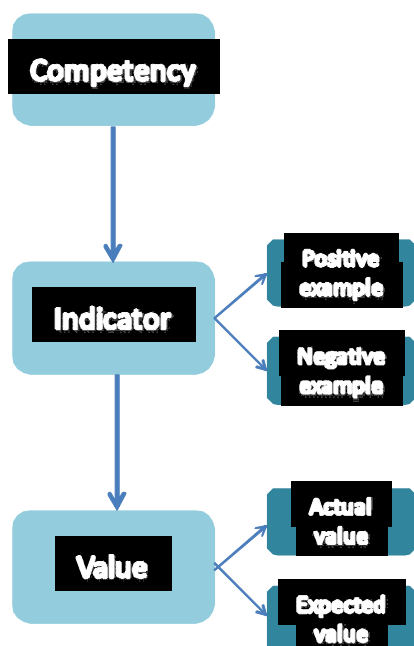
There are a number of competency models created by professional bodies whose members are active project, programme, portfolio, risk and change managers.

- The **project**-related frameworks are designed to address the skills required to manage a project from initial idea through to successful delivery i.e. the traditional project lifecycle
- The **change**-related frameworks encompass the skills associated with successful handover of completed deliverables and the adoption by new users. This 'transition' period requires a number of skills including relationship building and empathy, as well as a keen appreciation of the business environment into which the deliverables are to be adopted
- Effective change has to be communicated and the competencies associated with excellence; **training** and **coaching** provides a useful source of skills in this area.

Examples of frameworks are given in Appendix A.

Select competencies and indicators from each model

Within a competency model, there are a number of layers of information that need to be specified:



The **competency** is the behaviour, skill or ability that is expected of the individual.

The **indicator** is an explanation of how the competence is applied. It can be a stand alone sentence or paragraph, or it can be supported by a further level of detail which gives examples of how the behaviour might be demonstrated in positive and negative ways. Indicators must be written in such a way that they can be observed and measured.

The **value** is a valuation of capability which can be expressed numerically or descriptively (high, medium, low or satisfactory, good, excellent etc.). The competency model requires two values: the first is the actual value against which an individual scores themselves: the second is the 'ideal' or 'expected' value that the individual should attain.

Map competencies to each role

Different competencies will be essential, important or optional for different roles. To ensure that the model does not contain lots of skills irrelevant to the role, create variants of the model that give a targeted and focussed approach.

For example, the skills required to define and develop change are different to those required to implement and derive business benefits from it. Therefore a common approach is to develop derivations of the same model for different roles. For example there may be derivations for use by a practitioner (doer) and a sponsor (decision maker), or for a project management specialist and an operational/business specialist.

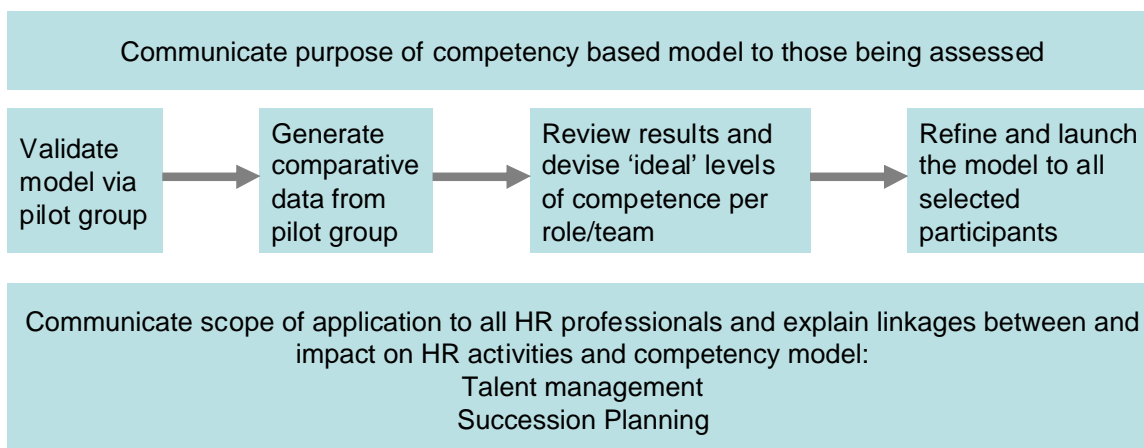
Agree levels of assessment for each indicator

The levels selected must discourage an individual from claiming the middle ground and encourage the individual to actively assess if they are strong or weak against each indicator. Therefore, levels of strong or weak or high, medium, low can work. Also scores from 1 to 5 or 1 to 10 are useful. Actual scores enable the results to be totalled and averaged across multiple individuals which can add richness to the reports generated from the model.

Generate competency model

This is the last step prior to the launch of the model. The model is reviewed to ensure that the competencies selected from the different best practice approach use common terminology and explanations of each skill and indicator of behaviour.

Launch competency model



Communicate purpose of competency based model to those being assessed

The competency model is a positive development for the organisation as it clarifies the skills required to successfully implement change. For an individual its development can appear threatening, as the model is used to assess current skill levels and to define the required skills that an individual must attain in their current role. It is essential therefore that communications are devised that clearly explain how the model will be applied, how frequently it will be used and what will happen to the data that results from each assessment. Individuals will want to know how a competency model for effectively implementing change fits with any existing models or assessment tools in use elsewhere in the organisation.

Validate the model via a pilot group

The model needs to be reviewed to confirm its relevance and to make sure it is clear and easy to understand. The competencies and their indicators need to be clear and unambiguous so that each person who uses the model interprets the words in the same way.

A model that assesses skills in implementing change can affect a wide number of roles within the organisation therefore the pilot group should reflect this diversity, including representatives from:

- Project or programme sponsors, managers and team members
- Other participating functional managers responsible for the implementation of change:
 - Operations Managers
 - Internal Audit Manager
 - Finance Manager
 - HR Manager (learning and development and organisational design)
 - Procurement Manager
 - Compliance Manager
 - Risk Manager
 - Quality Manager

Generate comparative data from pilot group

The values that each of the pilot group awarded themselves against each indicator need to be 'sense checked' to see if the model is delivering assessment results that are aligned to the actual skills of those assessing themselves.

Adjustments may need to be made including the removal of ambiguous indicators or the addition of further indicators to enhance the complexity of the skill being assessed. For example if the pilot group all scored themselves highly in a competency which only senior managers or those sponsoring or authorising change are likely to have then it might be necessary to clarify the level of authority required in the behaviour to encourage those without the skill to give themselves a low value.

Review results and devise 'ideal' levels of competencies per role/team

Users of the model will want to understand how highly skilled they currently are against the values that are expected of them. Each indicator therefore must be given an expected or ideal value for each role, team, specialism etc. depending on who the model is aimed at.

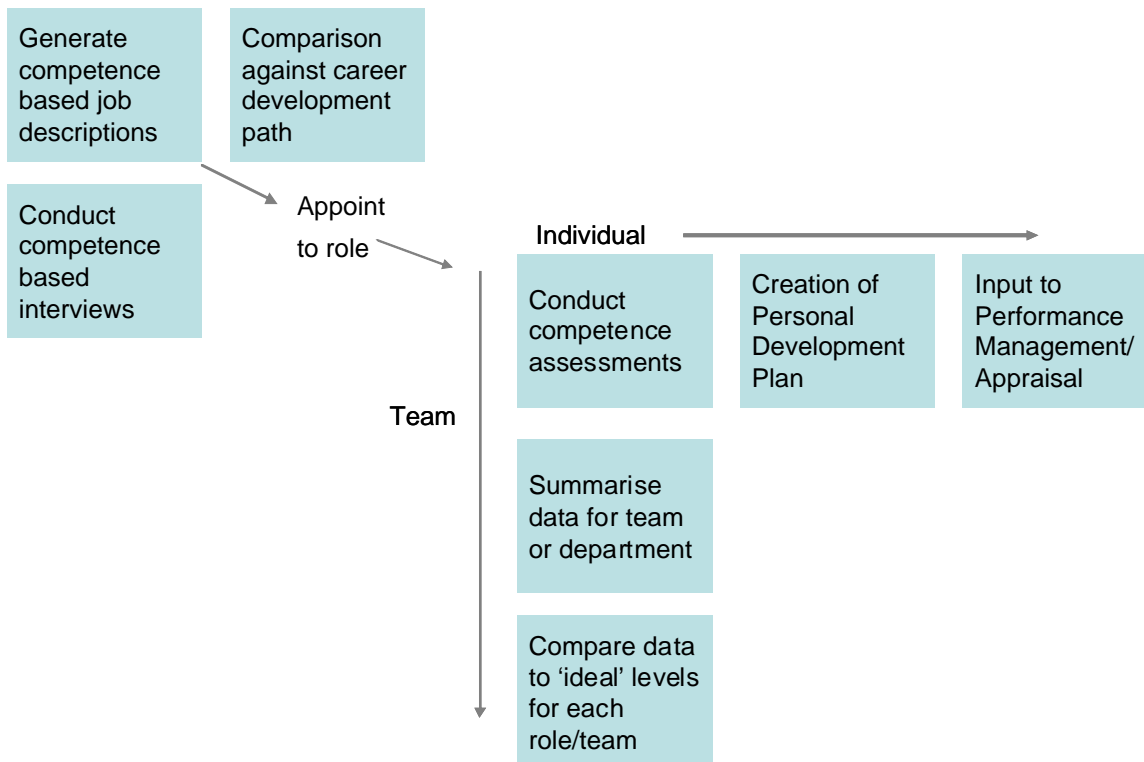
Refine and launch the model to all selected participants

Prior to launch all amendments to the model identified during use by the pilot group must be made and those selected to use the model must be notified. The model is refined during its creation but all participants should be encouraged to continuously refine and develop it over time

Communicate scope of application to HR professionals

When competency models are devised for specialist areas there is a danger that the development has not be undertaken in conjunction with other HR-related activities. Many organisations already have competency models for management skills and any models for project, programme, portfolio, change and risk management should be integrated where possible, otherwise there is the danger of a two tier approach to assessing skills in the organisation.

Apply competency model



Generate competence based job descriptions and conduct competency based interviews

The competency model provides the definitions of skills that apply when hiring or promoting staff. The contents of the model should therefore form the basis of competency-based job descriptions and competency-based interview questions. Candidates are asked to describe a situation where they demonstrated key competencies of most interest to the interviewer. These conversations make use of the STAR model, where the candidate describes the situation, the task, the activity and the results of their behaviour.

Comparison against career development path

When an organization defines the competencies that it wishes to emphasise then the competencies can be mapped to a career development map that shows how different paths can be followed to allow individuals to pursue a variety of careers within the organization. This is particularly important in the world of project management as careers can encompass many options including Project or Programme Managers, Change Managers, Risk Managers, technical specialists, specialists in specific systems or operational procedures.

Conduct competence assessments

The process is intuitive; staff are trained how to undertake their assessments and sufficient time in the business day is provided for staff to undertake their assessment.

Summarise the data for the team or department

There is a great benefit in comparing the data against all those performing the same role or working in the same team or department. Managers can see the average skill level (as compared with peers) and who the under- and over-performers are. This knowledge will enable managers to

take localised actions for coaching the under-achievers and giving more stretching tasks to the high performers as well as feeding this information into the talent management processes that are operated by the HR function.

Compare data to 'ideal' levels for each role/team

The results of individual assessments and the total level of performance for groups can be compared against a target that the organisation has set. This target might be a level of skill the organisation believes is mandatory to maintain current levels of performance or productivity or it might be an aspirational level which links to the achievement of the strategic objectives.

Creation of Personal Development Plan

Addressing a skills gap identified by a competency assessment is specific to the person who was assessed. Therefore the development plan will include activities that are appropriate for that individual. These activities include:

- Formal training courses
- Workshops that address specific issues
- Continual professional development activities including membership of professional associations, subscriptions to specialist magazines and web based communities and secondments to other roles or teams
- Coaching or mentoring with experienced practitioners

Input to Performance Management/Appraisal

Use of the competency assessment can be aligned to the performance management process of an organisation via the periodic performance review and appraisal meeting. The individual completes the assessment which produces a report for use at the appraisal meeting, drawing attention to strengths and weaknesses which helps to focus on developing the competencies that will drive performance against agreed strategic goals.

Conclusion

Competency models deliver significant business benefits. Their use sends a clear message to staff, suppliers and customers about the level of skill that employees must demonstrate in the performance of their roles.

In recent years there has been a rise in the development of specialist models targeting well defined groups of technical or managerial skill sets. It is expected that this trend will continue.

The challenge for organisations is to scan the environment for each of these models and assess their relevance to the culture, vision and mission of the organisation. Developing a model tailored to the needs of the organisation ensures its relevance for developing organisational capability, whilst sourcing elements of the model from best practice approaches will motivate employees.

This link to best practice provides a clear mapping of skills to the membership of the professional bodies which originally created the competency models. This provides the external validation that employees seek from continual professional development activities.

Maven can assist you to address project management in the wider context of organisational development. We cannot fix all of your problems – we are not, and do not claim to be, a management consultancy. We are however experts in capability building and can work with you to align programme, project, risk and change management with the organisation you wish to become. We have the expertise and experience to do the alignment for you but it is our ethos to transfer the skills into our clients so they become self-sufficient going forward. Our services are designed to tap into initiatives designated as ‘transformational change’ programmes, talent management strategies etc. - in other words, to take our services outside of the narrower definitions of project management and of training.

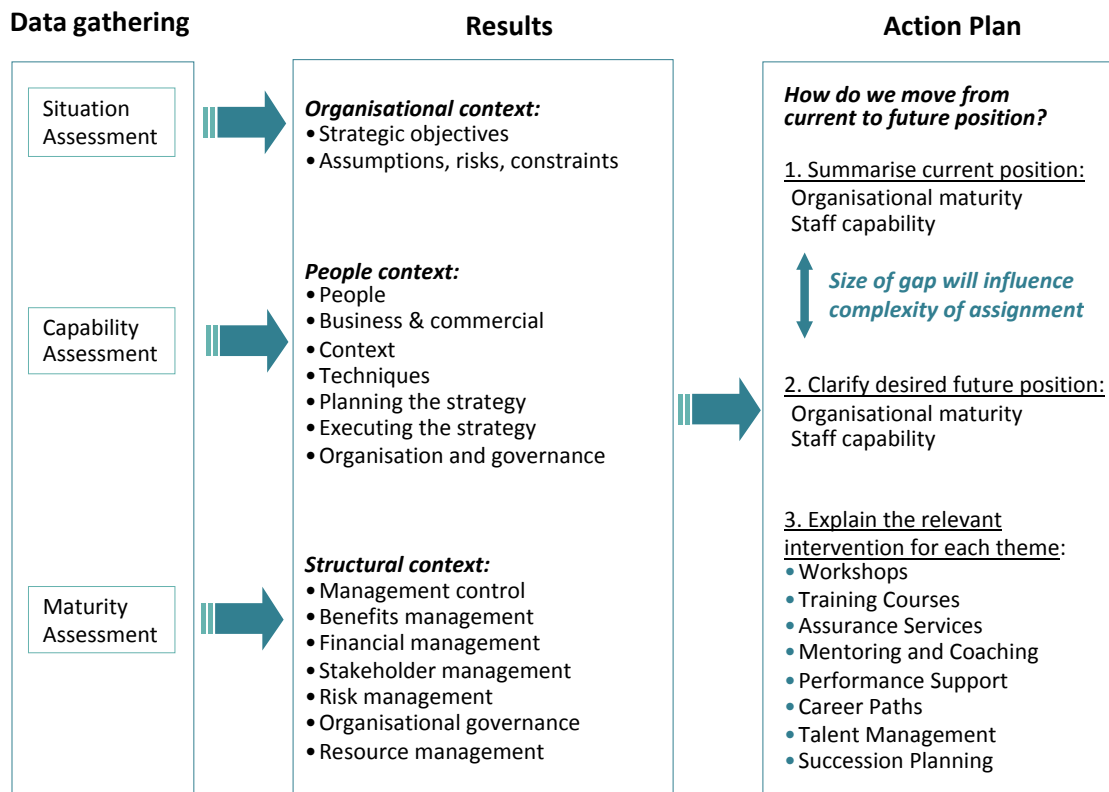
We apply a staged, structured approach to capability building by addressing:

The situation: we gather information on the objectives of the organisation and the goals and key performance indicators that need to be met

The people: we use best practice competence frameworks to assess current capability


The structure: we conduct a maturity assessment to demonstrate where the organisation is currently in relation to running its projects and, equally importantly, how it can progress to the next level of maturity

The diagram below illustrates the approach in more detail:



This approach has been successfully applied with our clients and Maven will be pleased to discuss its applicability to your organisation in more detail.

Appendix A - Sample competency models

	<p>In the U.K. the Association for Project Management (APM) has developed its 'APM Competence Framework' which identifies 47 competencies in seven distinct skill areas specific to project and programme management. For each competence, an individual will assess themselves against two dimensions:</p> <p>Knowledge – an individual has understanding of the subject Experience – an individual has practically applied the subject</p>
	<p>Project Management Institute (PMI) is a global organization which represents project managers across many sectors. It also has a competency framework, called the <i>Project Manager Competency Development (PMCD) Framework – Second Edition</i>, which provides general context for the definition, assessment and development of project manager competency. The framework outlines the key dimensions of project management competency and identifies those competencies that are most likely to impact project manager performance.</p>
	<p>International Project Management Association (IPMA) represents more than 50 project management associations from all continents. It sets professional standards and promotes project management as a profession. It has a competency framework called the IPMA Competence Baseline covering competencies for project, programme and portfolio management.</p>
	<p>The Council for Administration is the sector skills council for business skills and has developed a number of National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership. Included in these are six standards for facilitating change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage innovation in your team ▪ Encourage innovation in your area of responsibility ▪ Encourage innovation in your organisation ▪ Lead change ▪ Plan change ▪ Implement change
	<p>The Change Management Institute is an Australia-based organisation, with chapters in the UK and South Africa. It has created a model with 11 competency areas that it views as an essential toolkit for change practitioners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facilitating change

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strategic thinking ▪ Thinking and judgement ▪ Influencing others ▪ Coaching for change ▪ Project management ▪ Communication ▪ Self management ▪ Facilitation – meetings and workshops ▪ Professional development ▪ Specialist expertise – learning and development; communication
	<p>Trainer Performance and Monitoring Assessment (TPMA) is a competency model for trainers. It provides a framework for the objective assessment of a trainer's delivery performance and associated signposting of developmental activity.</p> <p>TPMA is authorized, governed and monitored by the Institute of IT Training. It is a record of the training professional's quality of performance in a live environment aligned to industry standards - a real quality benchmark for trainers.</p> <p>TPMA assesses the delivery skills of trainers, not the subject matter; therefore it can be used for all trainers.</p>
	<p>This competency framework has been designed by the membership of the Association for Coaching (AC). It incorporates the processes AC members believe to be core to excellence across the many differing areas of coaching which enable client /coachee to obtain their desired outcome.</p>
	<p>The Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA) identifies the skills needed to develop effective information systems. The skills are grouped into six categories and, whilst this model might at first appear too specialised to be applicable for developing a competency model for implementing change, several of the categories identify the skills needed to change an organisation ready for new systems. These categories include strategy and architecture, business change and client interface.</p>

For further information about Maven Training and its capability building services please contact:

Melanie Franklin

Telephone: 020 7403 7100

e-mail: melanie.franklin@maventraining.co.uk or e-mail: info@maventraining.co.uk

website: www.mavencapability.co.uk or www.maventraining.co.uk