

Appeared in *Human Resource Planning*, 30(4), p.12 as commentary on an article by Robert Eichinger in that issue.

## Let's Buy the Conclusions, But Not the Analysis

Gerry Ledford  
Ledford Consulting Network, LLC

I am impressed by the degree to which unsupported assertions are Teflon-coated, while data attracts counter-arguments like a magnet. I often have seen a speaker make sweeping, unsupported, overblown generalizations, and have seen the audience respond by nodding, smiling knowingly, and complimenting the speaker on his or her wisdom and insight. Another speaker makes the same arguments with data, the response is often nit-picking about how the speaker collected and analyzed the data. In part, this is because the data are almost never as convincingly one-sided as the sweeping generalizations. In part, data analysis just gets those critical thinking, left-brain processes going, and many of us can't stop the process if we take the data seriously. As a result, the forest (lessons learned) is often lost in trees (the data).

My reactions to Bob Eichinger's piece show me that I'm just like that guy in the back of the room who can't let go of the data. Therefore, to make sure that I don't miss the forest, I would begin by summarizing his main points as follows:

1. Most managers do not have as many as five competencies on which they are superior to (that is, have a competitive advantage over) other managers.
2. Even fewer managers are high on as many as five competencies that are critical to success; many managers are good at things that don't matter very much.
3. Managers (and the rest of us) should work on overcoming weaknesses that get in the way of their success, because most of us have some pretty big and important weaknesses.

I agree with all of these points. Indeed, if Bob had made his main points in this form and supported them with a few folksy stories, I would have nodded, smiled, and agreed with him. Since he used data, I'm hooked, and I have a few problems with whether the data, however extensive, really prove his points.

Bob's first analysis addresses the common advice, that managers build their career around 5-7 strengths. Is this possible? The analysis indicates to me that it is, at least for many managers. In looking at the table, I would use the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile as a cut point. A manager at or above this cut point will be superior to nine out of ten fellow managers on at least five competencies. Becoming excellent at just five of 69 competencies would not seem to be a formidable challenge for any manager with ambition and talent. Indeed, the table shows that *one-third* of managers meet this criterion. The fact that just over a fourth have no strengths at which they are superior to 90 percent of their peers did not surprise me at all. I find these data somewhat encouraging. At least a third of managers have, relatively speaking, great strengths as managers. The pool of managers who are superior on at least five competencies is larger than I would have guessed.

The second analysis poses a more serious problem. It restricts the analysis to the eight out of 69 competencies that prior research has shown to be the best differentiators of effectiveness. The “Big 8” include such competencies as creativity, managing vision, and building effective teams. Bob finds that very few managers are high on at least five of these competencies.

Here, however, a statistical artifact gets in the way. The “Big 8” were selected from the pool of 69 competencies because they were the most strongly correlated with a measure of effectiveness. If a correlation is high, people high on a given competency also scored high on effectiveness, those in the middle on the competency were middling in effectiveness, and those low on the competency were low in effectiveness. The higher the correlation, the more perfectly we match this pattern. When the analysis says that few people are high on at least five of the “Big 8”, all we are doing is proving that the Big 8 are good measures. A competency is not a good differentiator if a great many people are high on it. Therefore, concluding that relatively few people are high on any five of the Big 8 is somewhat tautological; if there were too many people were high on the competency, it would not have been one of the Big 8 in the first place.

However, although I don’t buy the data, I do buy the lesson: make sure that the effort you expend on increasing your competencies is spent on competencies that make you more effective.