

# Using the Career Architect to Assess and Develop Leadership Competencies

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The Leadership Architect, formerly known as the Career Architect, created by Mike Lombardo and Bob Eichinger and published in the early 1990s, is a set of tools for assessing and developing management and leadership skills. It includes 67 researched-based competencies, 19 behaviours that can stall or stop a career, and a comprehensive development planning system based on a 70-20-10 approach.

Roughly 70% of development comes from challenging jobs and assignments; 20% from learning from others, good and bad examples; and 10% from course work and readings. Today, the Career Architect is one component of a fully integrated set of products known as the Leadership Architect Suite, providing tools and a methodology for everything from organisation development and job profiling to training, individual development, team development and succession planning.

The 67 leadership competencies remain the heart of the Suite and provide a common language for assessing and developing both individuals and organisations. It is important to note that this is a competency library, not a competency model. As such, it is not expected that one would be good (or need to be good) at all 67 competencies at any given point. The behaviours tend to come into play over a career and their importance varies by job, function, level and business.

Each Leadership Architect competency is written on a card providing skilled, unskilled and overused definitions of the behaviour. The competency cards are used to create job profiles, assess individual and team skills and identify behaviours that separate superior from average performance. We find them particularly useful in assessing an individual's portfolio of skills and identifying gaps between his or her current job and possible future opportunities.

Although the complete Leadership Architect Suite includes more than 55 paper and electronic products, this article focuses on using four products

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to assess and develop current and future leaders. We'll explain how career counsellors, HR professionals, coaches, managers and individual learners can use the tools to assess needs, identify gaps and create development plans ranging from simple, "get going immediately," self-development plans to more comprehensive, multi-year career strategies.

A number of simple, easy to administer applications requiring little or no training can be accomplished with:

- *The Leadership Architect Competency Sort Cards* for assessing skill and the importance of competencies, and
- *For Your Improvement*, a book for creating immediate development plans.
- A deeper assessment and more comprehensive career plan is developed using: *Voices* [2002] for 360-degree feedback
- *Career Architect Development Planner* for creating comprehensive, multi-year career development plans

Much of our work is focused on helping high potential managers and executives deal effectively with change and transitions. Many of our clients are high performers with successful track records who experience problems during transitions – often when they're promoted to a bigger job with broader responsibilities. It is our experience that many times these managers and executives experience problems in the new role not because of a weakness per se, but because their strengths have gone into overdrive. They continue to use what worked in the past and fail to learn new skills for the new situation.

Four core principles underscore our work with clients. Successful development depends on:

- Self awareness of one's pattern and portfolio of skills;
- Motivation to do something different because current practices are no longer working;
- Development tasks to force the issue; and
- Learning from experience and adding new learning tactics.

For the purposes of this article we'll focus on the first and third points – specifically how we use The Career Architect to enhance self awareness and construct development plans. Although the tools can be used to address a variety of development needs, we'll concentrate on the special case of using them to tone down or neutralize overused strengths.

### **Self Awareness**

You can't work on a need you don't know you have. Studies at The Centre for Creative Leadership found those who were successful across

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time and in different situations knew themselves better. They knew their strengths, knew their weaknesses and kept themselves out of trouble by adding new behaviours and learning tactics. Derailment, on the other hand, is partly not learning new things or being blocked to new learning. Derailed leaders quit learning, thought they were infallible, became legends in their own minds, couldn't make transitions to new jobs or ways of behaving, and relied on what worked in the past (McCall, Lombardo & Morrison 1988).

A history of success, particularly the early and middle career years and in similar-type jobs, can have a narrowing effect on one's skill set. A promotion to a bigger or different type job is when we often see strengths go into overdrive and weaknesses become more apparent. Bright problem solvers only accept their own solutions and miss getting new ideas. The organized become detail drones and miss the big picture. The creative have their fingers in too many pies and can't bring ideas to market.

The first step in development is an accurate and balanced view of one's portfolio of skills. The Leadership Architect Competency Sort cards provide a good starting point for understanding competencies and looking at one's behaviour patterns. Either individually or in a workshop setting, we begin with an educational session about how people develop and then use the competency sort cards for self-examination. In the simplest application, we ask individuals to sort the 67 cards into three roughly equal piles in answer to the question, "What are my highest, middle and lowest skills relative to me?" They divide the cards into:

- Highest or top 22 skills,
- Middle 23 skills,
- Lowest 22 skills.

It's a relative assessment – relatively speaking, these are the person's top third, middle third and bottom third skills. Although often resisted, sorting the competencies into three equal piles is critical. Without a forced method people have a tendency to be overly positive or negative. For most people a normal distribution is probably more accurate but our goal is primarily to identify patterns and themes. Because self-assessments may be only partially accurate (people tend to be fairly accurate about their strengths and less so about the "soft" areas), we always recommend the person validate the assessment with others who know him or her well.

We then review the competencies in larger clusters to identify themes in

the highest and lowest skills. A useful method is to look at the competencies in terms of Power Skills, Saving Graces and Renewal Skills. Eight competencies make up the Power set. These competencies (Action Oriented, Command Skills, Results, etc.,) are the most common reasons given to account for promotions and performance. They lead to getting things done and achieving tactical results. The eight Saving Graces (Approachability, Humour, Listening, etc.,) serve as balancers and can compensate for mistakes or shortcomings. They are the most frequently mentioned positives after the “buts” in organisations. “Sue can be really pushy, but her heart is in the right place.” Nine competencies make up the Renewal Skills (Dealing with Ambiguity, Composure, Learning on the Fly, Self Knowledge, etc.,). These competencies help keep the other skills updated and fresh. They are the skills used most in learning something new and keeping an open and broad view of things.

A pattern we often see among managers and executives who are experiencing trouble is all the Power Skills in the top third and many or most of the Renewal Skills in the bottom third. Whether or not they derail can depend in part on how skilled they are at the Saving Graces. For many, the Power Skills are in overdrive.

A unique aspect of the Leadership Architect competencies is the concept of overusing strengths. Eichinger and Lombardo define overused strengths as skills that are in overdrive and causing noise. All skills or competencies have an effective or upside and a potentially ineffective or dark side. To some extent, performance troubles may be due less to a weakness and more to a revved up strength.

To help identify possible overused strengths, we ask people to review their 22 top skills, read the “skilled” definition and then read the “overused” definition. If both definitions are descriptive, the cards are placed in a new pile called Overused. The relationship between overused strengths and unskilled areas (lower third) can be very enlightening. For example, a manager in one of our workshops had been praised time and time again for his bias for action and speed at getting things done. He was, in fact, the fastest card sorter we had ever seen. As a newly appointed general manager, however, he was struggling.

He identified Action Oriented, competency #1 in the card deck, as a towering strength. We asked him to review and confirm that the skilled definition described him. (Reprinted with permission).

- Enjoys working hard
- Is action oriented and full of energy for the things he/she sees as

challenging

- Not fearful of acting with a minimum of planning
- Seizes more opportunities than others.

“Absolutely. That describes me perfectly.” Then we asked him to read the “overused” definition.

- May be a workaholic
- May push solutions before adequate analysis
- May be non-strategic
- May over manage to get things done too quickly
- May have personal and family problems due to disinterest and neglect
- May not attend to important but non-challenging duties and tasks
- May ignore personal life, burn out.

He smiled and said, “Okay, I get the point.”

Explaining the concept of overused strengths helps learners understand why they may be struggling (often for the first time in a career) with aspects of a new job or having difficulty making a transition. They see that current problems may be an outcome of doing a good thing too much. Identifying overused strengths is important because development strategies are different, as we’ll discuss in the next section.

It’s important to note that overused strengths are used too often, too hard or in too many situations. Some people have no overused skills. Others have several. Focusing on one’s strengths doesn’t always cause career problems and can lead to a long and healthy career...unless circumstances change. Overused strengths become a problem when situations change and people don’t. Since many managers and executives we work with are on the fast track in their companies, they are often asked to make huge jumps in responsibility and that’s generally when a broader or different skill set is needed. Overused strengths get in the way of new learnings.

The card sort process works well with individuals or groups and provides a starting point for understanding one’s portfolio of skills. Although most people believe they know themselves well, we find that self assessments are generally only partially accurate. People tend to be more accurate about their strengths, less accurate about weaknesses, and particularly inaccurate about interpersonal skills and impact on others. In a worst case scenario the person has a blind spot – he or she perceives something as a strength that others view as a clear weakness.

For that reason, multi-rater or 360-degree feedback provides a richer and

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more accurate skill assessment. The Voices tool enables raters to electronically assess the learner's skill at all 67 competencies, a subset, or custom competencies unique to the organization. The tool produces a series of reports, including one highlighting the best development opportunities based on the largest gaps between skill and importance from the largest number of rater groups. A more advanced version of Voices also offers an option of asking raters to what extent a learner might overuse his or her strengths.

As with the card application, we look at patterns and themes in the person's highest and lowest rated skills, regardless of actual score. Because feedback ratings are often inflated, the score may not be as meaningful as the pattern in the top and bottom rated skills. A fairly typical pattern among executives experiencing trouble is over utilizing command skills, intellectual horsepower, and action orientation while underutilizing building teams, motivating others and informing.

### **Development Tasks that Force the Issue**

You can't work on a need if you don't know how. Development lies in the land of the uncomfortable. It requires getting out of one's comfort zone and trying new behaviours.

Developmentally, one may use The Career Architect tools to:

- Enhance a strength,
- Take a middle skill to a strength,
- Work on a weakness,
- Work on an untested area, or
- Compensate for an overused strength.

For the purposes of this article, we'll focus on using the tools to create a development plan targeted at overused strengths.

The Career Architect provides several levels of development tools, from simple, "get started immediately," self-development plans to comprehensive, multi-year career strategies. The simplest and most widely used is *For Your Improvement*. This book provides a chapter for each of the 67 competencies and 19 Career Stallers and Stoppers. Each chapter includes:

- Unskilled definition (the before picture)
- Skilled (the after picture)
- Overuse (using a skill too much)
- Some Causes (reasons why someone may not be skilled at the competency)
- Map (why the competency is important)

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- 10 tips or remedies for building the competency
- Book and audiotape suggestions

The handbook contains over 5,000 development tips and is completely cross referenced so reading the remedies in one section might direct the learner to other competencies for additional tips.

From a development perspective, overused strengths require a different type of development strategy. The plan for a weakness is fairly clear – tasks to learn and practice the new skill coupled with real-time feedback. An overused strength, however, is still strength – an important asset in many situations. It is almost impossible (and a strategy destined for failure) for someone to attempt scaling back or doing less at something in which they excel. Imagine telling an executive to “focus less on results,” or “try to show people you’re not as smart as you really are.”

For each competency, *For Your Improvement* provides a list of compensators – competencies that can neutralize or balance overused strengths. The person leaves his or her strengths alone and works on compensation plan to build skills in other areas that balance, tone down or neutralize overused skills. For example, the plan for someone who overuses timely decision-making might be to improve his or her planning or process management skills. Someone who overuses motivating others might need to focus on building command or conflict management skills.

Compensators are like surge suppressors – they keep overdone skills in check. Listening is known as the universal compensator. Improving listening skills, even if only slightly, can take the sharp edges off as many as 30 overused strengths. People who become better listeners look more patient, less arrogant, more approachable, etc.

Ideally, people select a competency that (1) compensates for one or more overused strengths, and (2) is in their lowest third skills. This is humorously known to our clients as a “2-fer” – double gain from a single effort.

As an example, a sales manager overused presentation skills, interpersonal savvy, motivating others and approachability. While customers and direct reports loved him, his division was not making its plan. We reviewed *For Your Improvement* [FYI] and highlighted several competencies that might tone down his overused strengths. Competency #57, Standing Alone, was listed as a compensator for all four of his overused strengths and was in his lower third (a 4-fer). Business Acumen, Conflict Management and Command Skills compensate for

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three of his overused strengths. We used the unskilled definitions from FYI to help him paint a current or before picture – how he would describe his behaviour in those areas today. Then we did the opposite – what would it look like if someone were skilled at those competencies? Clearly defining the need and drilling down to specific behaviours is important. People who aren't skilled at a behaviour sometimes have a difficult time picturing what it would look and feel like if they were.

We reviewed the *For Your Improvement* tips for each competency and helped create specific, measurable and time-bound goals, and constructed feedback mechanisms to check progress. *For Your Improvement* is extremely useful for getting people started on a development plan. For high potentials and those who need a longer-term career strategy, we supplement the For Your Improvement plan with additional strategies from the Career Architect Development Planner. Published in paper and electronic formats, the tool offers the best feedback methods and sources based on one's needs, descriptions of develop-in-place assignments, and full time jobs to build the needed skills.

The Career Architect Development Planner produces a menu of development actions based on the six key development remedies (listed in order of developmental impact).

- Full time jobs
- Part-time, develop-in place assignments
- Feedback
- Coaching/Counselling/Mentoring
- Readings and Coursework
- Self Development

For example, a Career Architect plan for working on Directing Others, Motivating and Managing and Measuring Work might suggest the person look for opportunities to manage resisting people through an unpopular change, tackle a fix-it or turnaround project, or work on a project with a tight time deadline. A fix-it/turnaround or start-up job might be a good potential next career move.

The goal from a career or succession management perspective is to assign people to jobs and challenges that provide an opportunity to broaden their perspective and learn new skills. Some of that involves letting go of past practices and trying new ones. As Eichinger and Lombardo say in *The Leadership Machine*, the secret of success is continuously learning to do what you don't know how to do.

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## Summary

Both authors used the tools in The Leadership Architect Suite as HR professionals inside companies and now as private consultants. A major benefit is the common language created by the competency library and a research-based development system ranging from simple, easy to get started remedies to more long-range career strategies. Some tools, such as The Competency Sort cards and the *For Your Improvement* book, offer immediate benefits and can be used with little training. In addition, the narrowly defined competencies and three behavioural anchors — skilled, unskilled and overused — help learners get specific about development needs. Because each tool in the Suite is designed to stand-alone or be used in concert with one another clients may add additional tools as needed. In some applications we use only a few tools. Other clients elect to use the entire Suite for a fully integrated approach to performance management, selection, training, and succession management as well as individual development

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