Identifying employee skill gaps

Employees' own assessments of their learning needs can lead to more effective training programs.
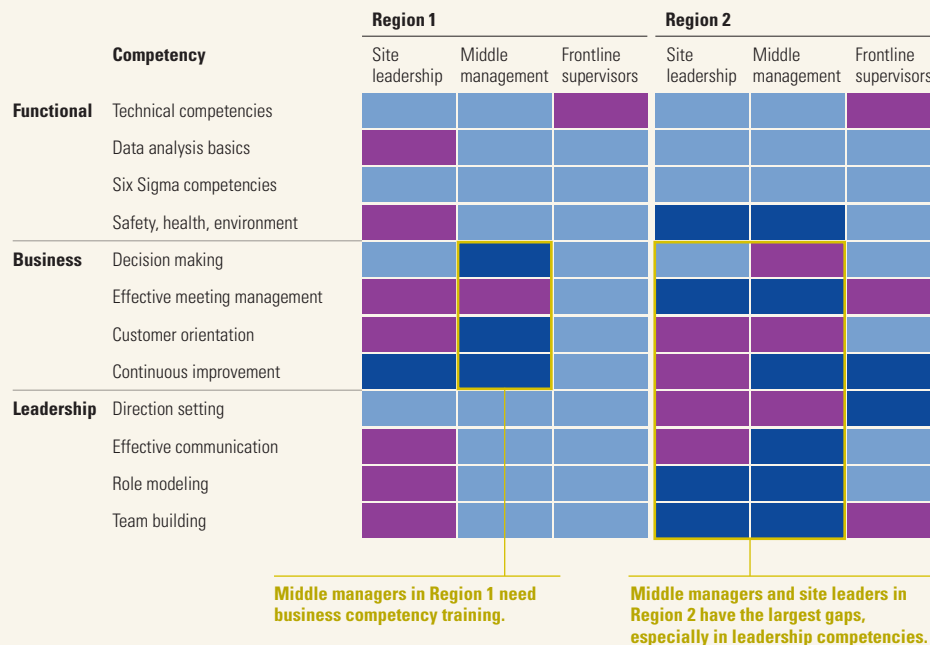
Pierre Gurdjian and Oliver Triebel

Identifying the areas where organizations need to improve their capabilities most is an important step in any change effort. Such a skill is helpful particularly in times of cost-cutting—where limited training resources must be used to close the critical competency gaps that prevent companies from meeting business objectives.

However, many training programs don't yield the desired results. One reason is that they are usually launched without sufficient knowledge of where the gaps in employee skills exist. We find that a good way to pinpoint these learning needs is to survey employees and let them evaluate the current skill levels of their peers and estimate the skill level their group must reach in order to be successful. An added advantage of this inclusive approach is that it heightens employees' awareness of their learning needs and helps break down any resistance to learning new skills.

Exhibit

Improving skills in a targeted way

Illustrative example

■ More improvement required ■ Improvement required ■ Less improvement required

	Competency	Region 1			Region 2		
		Site leadership	Middle management	Frontline supervisors	Site leadership	Middle management	Frontline supervisors
Functional	Technical competencies	Less	Less	Improvement	Less	Less	Improvement
	Data analysis basics	Improvement	Less	Less	Less	Less	Less
	Six Sigma competencies	Less	Less	Less	Less	Less	Less
	Safety, health, environment	Improvement	Less	Less	More	More	Less
Business	Decision making	Less	More	Less	Less	Improvement	Less
	Effective meeting management	Improvement	Improvement	Less	More	More	Improvement
	Customer orientation	Improvement	More	Less	Improvement	Improvement	Less
	Continuous improvement	More	More	Less	Improvement	More	More
Leadership	Direction setting	Less	Less	Less	Improvement	Improvement	More
	Effective communication	Improvement	Less	Less	Improvement	More	Less
	Role modeling	Improvement	Less	Less	More	More	Less
	Team building	Improvement	Less	Less	More	More	Improvement

Middle managers in Region 1 need business competency training.

Middle managers and site leaders in Region 2 have the largest gaps, especially in leadership competencies.

A manufacturing company that embarked on a major performance transformation was aware of the costs involved in a large-scale capability-building program. It chose to survey site leaders, middle managers, and frontline supervisors. Using a heat map to visualize the results, the company found, for instance, that while middle managers in one region needed training to improve several business competencies, those in another region had gaps in their leadership skills. Based on the results of the survey, the company realized it could save money and improve its chances of success by rolling out a program targeting the different competencies that each group needed to improve the most. *Q*

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