

I know I can do this. I don't know if I can do that.

Chapter 5 Competence

Often the desire to appear competent impedes our ability to become competent, because we are more anxious to display our knowledge than to learn what we do not know.

— Magdeleine Sable

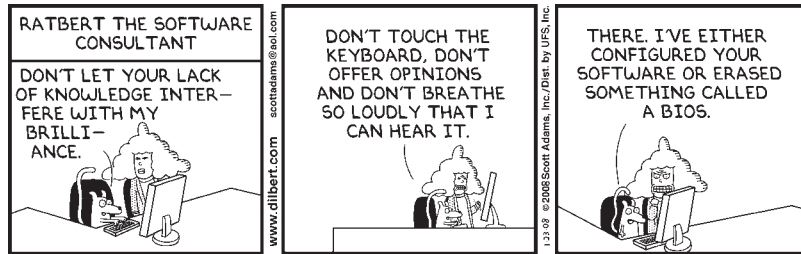


Competence is the assessment that you have the ability to do what you are doing or propose to do. In the workplace this usually means the other person believes you have the requisite capacity, skill, knowledge, and resources to do a particular task or job.

Here are three examples of how people have referred to competence: “I brought Linda in to run the office after Ron left so suddenly because I trust her ability as a leader to get the best out of people even in the most difficult situations. I know she’ll come through for them and for us.”

“I’m putting Raj on this project because I trust that if anyone can fix this mess, he can. He is my most competent engineering manager. What I ask is that you trust his lead and do what he asks.”

“Paul may have been a competent sales person, but he’s certainly wasn’t a competent district manager, so I don’t know how he got promoted to regional VP. The only thing I can imagine is the senior VP of sales doesn’t know how incompetent he is. Which kind of begs the question, how competent is our senior VP?”



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Being judged as competent means doing what you do well enough to satisfy the standards of the person who is judging you. Someone assesses you as competent when you have the skills, knowledge, and abilities to act effectively within a specific domain, such as accounting, marketing, project management, or leading people.

People judge us as competent in one domain but not in others. However, sometimes the “brightness effect” can cause people to confer an assessment of competence on you in an area where you don’t claim competence. For example, a highly competent engineer is promoted to a management position because people assume his competence in engineering means he will be competent at managing engineers. Managing others is a different skill set from engineering. If this has happened to you, the best thing you can do is be clear about what you know you can do, and what you have yet to learn.

Being competent does *not* mean being perfect. Part of doing something well is knowing what you don’t know, being willing to learn, and to ask for help when you need it. For example, Luisa was a highly competent engineer who had been promoted in two rapid steps, first to group manager and then 15 months later to director of development engineering. She had seven direct reports and oversaw a team of 28 engineers. Luisa knew her competence as a development engineer still granted her some credibility with the engineers who worked for her. She also realized that at the director level she was being judged on her competency as a manager and leader of people. And she knew she was still not sufficiently competent as a leader to be a strong director.

But one of Luisa's great strengths was her ability to admit to herself and others what she didn't know. She was open to learning and asked for help, feedback, direction, and suggestions from her manager and employees. Luisa sought mentoring from others, took courses, read books, and when she had exhausted those sources for learning she convinced her manager to approve funding for her to work with a leadership coach.

By publicly acknowledging her initial lack of competence as a leader at the director level, asking for help when she needed it, and taking steps to develop this competence, Luisa built and maintained the trust of her manager, peers and the people who worked for her. As she developed into a competent leader, her career continued to advance.

Trust Check

Have you ever worked with or for someone who you thought wasn't competent to do their job?

- *What were the standards you used to assess their competence?*
- *Where did those standards come from?*
- *Were they appropriate standards to use in this case?*

Building Trust: Competence

Here is what you can do to help build trust in your competence.

- **Make a list to clarify to yourself and others the areas you claim competence in.**
- **Define the standards by which your competence is assessed.** That may mean comparing your standards with others. When standards are clear and agreed on by everyone concerned, an assessment of competence — or incompetence — is easy to make. On the other hand, when standards for the task, job, or role being performed are unclear, or people disagree about them, it can easily lead to having at least some people distrusting your competence.
- **When you don't know something, say so and ask for help, clarification, training, or whatever you need to perform what was asked.** Cultivating trust in your competence doesn't mean you have to be fully competent from the get-go. It does require being honest with others about what you can and can't do, what you know and what you don't.

- **Ask for feedback from others about your performance.** Don't wait for them to tell you that you are making mistakes. Often people won't tell you your performance isn't good enough until you've made some big mistakes and they actively distrust your competence.