



**VALU**  
VA LEARNING UNIVERSITY

# Leadership Competencies

Building a Competent Organization



“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” *—John Quincy Adams*



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs



**ADVANCE**  
TRANSFORMING POTENTIAL INTO PERFORMANCE

# Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has committed to an ambitious transformation effort designed to improve service to our Nation's Veterans. The success of VA in accomplishing this important mission is highly dependent upon the capacity of its workforce. As a result, we have launched an unprecedented initiative to attain, retain, and develop the best and brightest employees in the Federal Government.

Both the world of work and the needs of the Veteran are constantly shifting, expanding, and become significantly more complex. Consequently, the demands placed on our leaders have continued to grow. To overcome the challenge of delivering unprecedented levels of high quality services to our Nation's Veterans, we must fill our talent pipeline with a strong leadership corps and provide them with the tools necessary to succeed in our ever changing environment.

We are committed to helping all our current and aspiring leaders to build their skills and grow in their career. Though there are many ways to describe effective leadership, a leader has three primary tasks:

- **Determining the way forward**
- **Deciding how to achieve results, and**
- **Engaging others to accomplish the mission**

Consequently, all leaders need a specific set of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to be effective. These KSAs comprise the competencies that we have recognized as important for all our leaders. In identifying these competencies, we have established VA's enterprise-wide competency model, which consists of three integral components: ***All Employee, Technical, and Leadership Competencies***. These three components of our enterprise competency model serve as the foundation on which we will continue to build a competent organization.

# How to use this guide

This guide was designed to provide a high-level overview of VA's leadership competency model (LCM) and outline the expectations for leaders across the Department. It will also serve as a reference for our leaders, enabling them to use the LCM for self-development and developing others.

## Self Development

Leaders can use the LCM to identify their strengths and areas for development and then to determine the training and development opportunities they should seek out.

## Developing Others

The LCM can be used to provide direct reports/ aspiring leaders with a clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in their current role and what it takes to advance to leadership roles.

Current and aspiring leaders can clearly see how one's expected level of skill increases at each career stage. By setting a common standard for behavior

and performance for all our employees and linking competencies to training and development opportunities, we begin the transformation that will help our employees better meet the complex needs of Veterans and grow in their careers with the VA. If our current and aspiring leaders demonstrate and build on these competencies, then we will be sure to meet our mission and goals.

The following sections will provide:

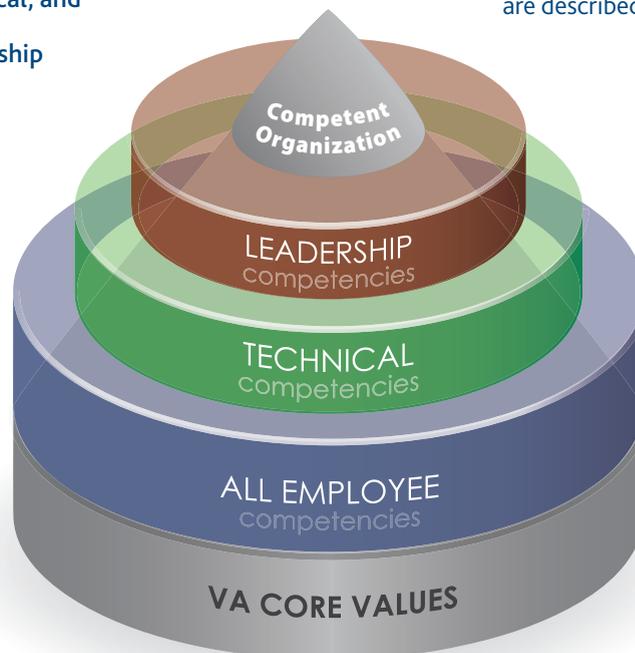
- The link between competencies and mission results
- An overview of all the employee competencies
- An in-depth review of the VA leadership competencies
- Descriptions of how the leadership competencies are demonstrated on the job
- A comparison of how competencies vary by leadership level

# What are competencies?

Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to build a high-performance organization capable of meeting current and future challenges. Competencies help us to align our people practices to meet mission requirements. Understanding the competencies needed to succeed in your career will help you plan your professional growth and development, identify the right training opportunities, and evaluate your progress. At VA, there are three critical types of competencies:

- All employee,
- Technical, and
- Leadership

*All employee* competencies are needed by all VA employees in order to be successful. You can think of these as the core capabilities of our workforce. Because of the diversity of our workforce and the positions that are represented here, all employees have *technical competencies* specific to their own job or occupation. These are the competencies that make the job of benefits processors different from nurses and nurses different than our cemetery directors. In addition to the all employee and technical competencies, being a successful leader requires the critical *leadership competencies* that are described throughout this guide.



# All employee competencies

All our employees—even leaders—need a core set of capabilities that help drive organizational success.

These are the competencies that serve as the foundation for all employees' behavior, and are paramount to building a competent organization. A leader cannot be successful if she/he does not meet the fundamental expectations that we have for all our employees.

We have identified six broad all employee competency categories that apply to every person at VA. Each category is further defined by more specific competencies.

## All Employee Competency Categories and Specific Competencies

*(Competencies presented below for your reference)*

### Communication

- Demonstrates effective written communication
- Demonstrates effective oral communication

### Interpersonal Effectiveness

- Demonstrates empathy
- Fosters diversity and inclusion
- Contributes to high-performing teams

### Critical Thinking

- Demonstrates creative problem solving skills
- Demonstrates good judgment

### Organizational Stewardship

- Exemplifies integrity
- Demonstrates accountability
- Organizes and prioritizes work
- Makes effective use of resources

### Veteran and Customer Focus

- Advocates for Veterans
- Meets customers' needs

### Personal Mastery

- Exhibits self-awareness and commitment to self development
- Demonstrates resilience, agility, and a sense of urgency

**Note:** Every employee also has technical competencies that are required for successful performance in each occupation or job. These competencies address occupation-specific or technical skills and will not be covered in the remainder of this guide.

# Competencies drive mission results

Our mission at VA is one of the most important in government.

We serve those who have served and sacrificed for their country. With that in mind, everything we do is focused on our three guiding principles. VA aspires to be:

- **Forward-looking:** We will seek out opportunities for delivering the best services with available resources, continually challenging ourselves to do things smarter and more effectively.
- **Results-driven:** We will be measured by our accomplishments, not by our promises.
- **People-centric:** Veterans and their families are the centerpiece of our mission and of everything we do. Equally essential are the people who are the backbone of the Department—our talented and diverse workforce.

Meeting the expanding needs of our Nation's Veterans requires a sustained investment in our people. This investment begins with identifying the capabilities required to meet our ever-increasing challenges. Competencies define what everyone at VA needs to know and be able to do to contribute to our mission and live our core values.



# Leadership competencies and our guiding principles

The guiding principles help us harness our current talent and develop our potential talent.

Notice the synergy between the essence of every leader's job and our guiding principles. In thinking about what makes our leaders successful, we can define our capabilities through the lens of our guiding principles. If we keep these in mind, we will stay our course, improve our capabilities, and remain true to our mission.



# The VA Leadership Competency Model

We have identified six broad leadership competency categories that apply to anyone in a formal leadership role.

Each category includes more specific competencies, which define success for leadership roles across the Department. Although these competencies are only required for formal leaders, aspiring leaders should refer to them to begin developing the skills needed for career progression into a leadership roles.

## Leadership Competency Categories and Specific Competencies



### Leading Change

Champions innovation

Communicates vision and drives change



### Global Perspective

Ensures strategic alignment

Enhances outcomes for Veterans



### Results Driven

Fosters reasonable risk-taking and drives execution

Fosters accountability to Veterans



### Business Acumen

Applies forward-looking human capital management principles

Applies sound financial and material resource management principles

Employs technology effectively



### Leading People

Promotes leadership at all levels

Inspires continual learning and development

Builds high-performing, diverse teams



### Building Coalitions

Drives integration

Builds and maintains partnerships

Demonstrates political savvy

Effectively manages conflicts

# Leadership across levels



Our leadership is extremely diverse, both within and across administrations and staff offices, yet we can nonetheless identify six broad leadership roles, or levels. These roles are based on level of experience, level of supervisory responsibility, and even impact (e.g., impact on immediate reports, on departments, on divisions, on the administrations, and even external stakeholders). You can refer to the *table below* to get a better idea of how responsibility varies for each leadership role.

Leadership Roles	Level of Responsibility
Senior Executive Service*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sets strategic direction, establishes goals, and monitors performance and mission accomplishments</li> <li>• Represents the Department, the Secretary, or Deputy Secretary in high-level external forums</li> </ul>
Senior Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leads a major division/function; participates in strategic decision-making; tracks and aligns goals; monitors performance and mission accomplishments</li> <li>• Interacts with, and influences SES or equivalent leaders</li> <li>• Leads and integrates the work of multiple groups; typically manages Intermediate Leaders</li> </ul>
Intermediate Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leads work units; justifies and directs resources; sets work unit goals and objectives</li> <li>• Interacts with, and influences Senior Leaders within VA</li> <li>• Leads and integrates the work of multiple groups; typically manages First-Line Supervisors</li> </ul>
First-Line Supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manages and appraises the performance of individual contributors; plans work; assigns or coordinates resources; monitors work for technical quality and/or timeliness.</li> </ul>
Team Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plans, coordinates, and monitors the work of a team without formal supervisory responsibilities</li> </ul>

\*or equivalent

# Leadership competencies in action

All the leadership competencies are important for success at VA. However, not all leaders are expected to perform each competency in the same way.

An Intermediate Leader, for example, would not be expected to demonstrate Driving Integration and Championing Innovation in the same way that a Senior Executive would.

The following pages provide examples of how behaviors and expectations may vary for leaders at different levels. Here's what you'll see on each page:

The image shows a screenshot of a document titled "Leadership Competencies in Action". On the left, there is a photo of a woman, Robin, Senior Leader. The main content area is titled "Results Driven" and includes a list of behaviors: "Guides and inspires others to achieve results and improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency", "Implements effective control measures", and "Fosters a climate of reasonable risk taking". Below this, there are two sub-sections: "Fosters Accountability to Veterans" and "Assessing Opportunities". Annotations with arrows point to various parts of the page: "Competency categories" points to the "Results Driven" header; "Relevant training offerings are listed" points to the "Assessing Opportunities" section; "We've highlighted one competency in each of the six categories to illustrate how behaviors and expectations vary for leaders at different levels." points to the "Results Driven" header and the "Fosters Accountability to Veterans" sub-section; and "Example" points to the bottom right corner of the screenshot.

We've highlighted one competency in each of the six categories to illustrate how behaviors and expectations vary for leaders at different levels.

# Leadership Competencies in Action



Alex, Team Leader

## Leading Change

Champions innovation

Communicates vision and drives change



# Leading Change

Positions the organization for future success by identifying new opportunities, implementing new strategies, and developing and improving products and services

- Creates a culture that fosters creativity and applies innovative solutions to drive organizational change
- Communicates the mission and values and provides milestones for decision-making and action

**Champions Innovation** is a competency that acknowledges the expectation that our leaders promote innovation and creativity. Compare Alex's behaviors below to see how a team leader and an intermediate leader manage conflict.

As a *team leader*, Alex is often:

- Describing trends and innovations within her personal area of expertise.
- Making incremental improvements by adapting solutions from similar settings.
- Recognizing and supporting creative ideas proposed by others.

For Alex to one day excel as an *intermediate leader*, the focus must expand to include:

- Looking beyond organizational boundaries to identify opportunities for improvement.
- Making small, but meaningful shifts in programs or processes by helping to develop and implement novel ideas.
- Encouraging creativity of others by recognizing employee efforts to generate new ideas.

## Sample Training Offering Available in TMS

### Becoming a Leader of Change Initiatives: Advanced Personal Focus

This course provides skill development in understanding and adapting to change. The program prepares an individual to recognize and embrace change by identifying tools and techniques that assess risk and opportunity, build influence, and focus on success even while learning to say no and develop meetings that move things forward.

### Managing Your Team through Change

Effective leaders understand how to help team members succeed in a changing environment. This course offers practical strategies for leaders to create a positive change environment and provides tools and techniques for leaders to identify and capitalize on opportunities created by change.

# Leadership Competencies in Action



Pat, Team Leader

## Global Perspective

Ensures strategic alignment

Enhances outcomes for Veterans



# Global Perspective

Demonstrates a broad view of the VA's mission, strategic priorities, and role within the Federal Government and broader community (e.g., healthcare community, public at large) • Understands and integrates stakeholder perspectives and takes action to improve delivery of benefits and services to Veterans •

The competency **Ensures Strategic Alignment** requires leaders to think broadly using both a short and long term perspective. Pat is a team leader. Consider how the behaviors he currently exhibits relate to what will be required as an intermediate leader.

As a *team leader*, Pat is able to demonstrate this competency by:

- Describing the major internal and external factors that affect the organization.
- Explaining at a basic level how changing conditions, current events, and historical contexts influence individual work and unit's work.

In the future, the way Pat demonstrates this competency will need to evolve. As *intermediate leader*, new behaviors that will illustrate a greater understanding of this competency include:

- Educating others on how major internal and external factors affect the organization.
- Evaluating how changing conditions and current events will impact the work group and incorporating this information when making plans and decisions.
- Responding to external changes that affect programs and policies (e.g., changes in administration or a new Veteran-related bill) by refocusing efforts, redistributing resources, or otherwise overcoming roadblocks.

## Sample Training Offering Available in TMS

### Clarifying Your Team's Purpose and Strategy Webinar

Clarifying Your Team's Purpose and Strategy helps leaders understand that clarity at every level is critical to an organization's success. They gain a clear understanding of their own purpose and how their job fits into the organization's strategy and mission. Participants then learn how to create a crystal-clear strategy for achieving team goals as they relate to the organization's mission and financial success.

### Goals and Setting Goals

In this course, you'll examine the types of goals you can use to advance your career and personal life, learn to construct goals that are both challenging and achievable, discover how to embed the seeds of success within your goals, and explore ways to align your goals with your own priorities and the priorities of others who influence the way you use your time.

# Leadership Competencies in Action



Robin, Senior Leader

## Results Driven

Fosters reasonable risk taking and drives execution

Fosters accountability to Veterans



# Results Driven

Guides and inspires others to achieve results and improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency • Implements effective control measures • Fosters a climate of reasonable risk taking •

**Fosters Accountability to Veterans** is a competency that requires leaders to drive mission results while balancing stakeholder interests. Robin is currently a senior leader in NCA, but attaining this position first required demonstrating this competency as a first-line leader.

As a *first-line leader*, early in her career, Robin often:

- Monitored and ensured adherence to established control systems and rules.
- With guidance, measured work quality against established standards.
- Held employees accountable for achieving results.

As a senior leader, Robin currently illustrates this competency by:

- Creating formal systems for monitoring progress and holding teams/units accountable for meeting or exceeding goals.
- Assuming ownership for her own and organizational mistakes and taking steps to mitigate their impact.
- Leveraging lessons learned from mistakes and failures to improve the VA.

Sample Training Offering Available in TMS

### Assessing Opportunities

Every change presents an opportunity and every opportunity involves a risk of some kind. How do we know how to assess an opportunity and make effective decisions about which changes to implement and which changes to abandon? This course helps managers assess these issues and decide what actions to take to minimize disruptions and ultimately turn the challenges of change into productive opportunities.

# Leadership Competencies in Action



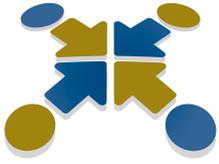
Sam, Senior Executive

## Business Acumen

Applies forward-looking human capital management principles

Applies sound financial and material resource management principles

Employs technology effectively



# Business Acumen

Demonstrates exceptional judgment and applies resource allocation and management skills to optimize business operations and quality of service •

The appropriate use of resources is important at all levels. However, as a senior executive, the competency ***Applies Sound Financial and Material Resource Management Principles*** must be demonstrated much differently than at the level of first-line leader. Sam is now a VHA executive, but take a moment to review how this competency was enacted at the two levels.

As a *first line leader*, Sam was expected to:

- Effectively and efficiently manage the expenditure of resources (time, money, materials, people) in support of operations, providing justification in relation to program objectives.
- Establish cost-effective, limited-focus budgets that incorporated the appropriate financial resources.

Now, as a *senior executive*, actions that demonstrate this competency include:

- Identifying financial resources available internal and external to the VA, and skillfully gaining access to these resources.
- Establishing systems to monitor expenditures within the Department to ensure that financial resources are effectively allocated to achieve the goals and objectives of the VA.
- Contributing to the enhancement and improvement of VA-wide financial management systems to meet organizational objectives.

## Sample Training Offering Available in TMS

### Essentials of Interviewing and Hiring: Behavioral Interview Techniques

Behavioral-based interviewing is becoming the norm as people realize its effectiveness in predicting what a candidate's behavior and performance are likely to be in the position for which they are interviewing. This course describes the characteristics of behavioral-based interviewing, how to develop behavioral-based questions, and then how to ask those questions effectively in an interview.

### Controlling Costs

This course provides an overview of the Control Costs process. It introduces the best practices outlined in A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) - Fourth Edition, published by the Project Management Institute (PMI®). Specifically, the course examines the inputs, tools and techniques, and outputs of the Control Costs process. In terms of the tools and techniques, it shows how to monitor cost performance through earned value management (EVM), forecasting, and other techniques such as to-complete performance index (TCPI). It also demonstrates how to calculate planned value, earned value, actual cost, schedule and cost variance, and schedule-performance and cost-performance indices. This course will assist in preparing the learner for the PMBOK® Guide certification exam.

# Leadership Competencies in Action



Chris, Team Leader

## Leading People

Promotes leadership at all levels

Inspires continual learning and development

Builds high-performing, diverse teams



# Leading People

Demonstrates commitment to employees and VA • Empowers and trusts others  
• Builds high-performing teams • Develops the ability of others to perform and contribute to the organization •

The competency *Inspires Continual Learning and Development* requires all leaders to promote the acquisition and application of new knowledge and skills. Specific behaviors are listed below as examples of how Chris, a *team leader* in a VBA regional office, currently demonstrates this competency and what will be expected in the future.

Chris is often:

- Describing the value of long-term development to her team members.
- Showing support of VA's development initiatives through her actions and conversations with others.

Expectations of an *intermediate leader* are a bit different. To meet expectations at the higher level, Chris will need to demonstrate this competency by:

- Allowing direct reports to have flexibility on the job and providing them with resources in accomplishing daily work in support of their efforts to participate in training and other developmental opportunities.
- Helping them apply what they have learned in training on-the-job.

## Sample Training Offering Available in TMS

### Management Essentials: Directing Others

This course provides information on the key proficiencies you require to effectively direct others. Specifically, the steps for setting direction and establishing clear objectives and goals with your direct reports are explored. The importance of organizing, including organizing resources, is discussed. Communicating for clarity and direction, including listening skills, barriers to effective communication, and tips for overcoming communication barriers are covered.

### Leadership Essentials: Motivating Employees

This course provides you with an understanding of why motivating strategies are important as a leader. It also provides you with practical techniques for encouraging motivation among employees in your organization.

### The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People For Managers

This is an intensive, application-oriented learning experience that focuses on the fundamentals of great leadership. Its approach to management development helps your team move from getting good results to attaining great and enduring results.

# Leadership Competencies in Action



**Lee, Senior Leader**  
Location

## Building Coalitions

Drives integration

Builds and maintains partnerships

Demonstrates political savvy

Effectively manages conflicts



# Building Coalitions

Develops networks and builds alliances • Collaborates with stakeholders to better achieve objectives • Finds common ground with a wide range of stakeholders and uses these contacts to build and strengthen internal support bases to better serve Veterans •

The competency ***Effectively Manages Conflict*** recognizes that all leaders need to deal with difference of opinion in a constructive manner. Notice how Lee displayed the competencies two different levels.

As a *first-line leader*, Lee illustrated this competency through:

- Encouraging discussion of differences of opinion as a means to stimulate healthy debate.
- Addressing conflicts by providing a safe and respectful environment for each party to discuss their needs and concerns.

In Lee's current role as a *senior leader*, actions that demonstrate this competency include:

- Mediating complex conflicts and disagreements to ensure solutions that are satisfactory to all parties.
- Identifying potential conflicts and proactively addresses them before they escalate.

## Sample Training Offering Available in TMS

### Workplace Conflict: Strategies for Resolving Conflicts

This course describes techniques you can use to deal effectively with a conflict situation. You'll learn that an important first step is to define the conflict by clarifying the issues surrounding it. You'll also find out about the importance of describing the conflict to the other party in a way that doesn't make them defensive. In addition, the course outlines collaboration skills that can help you deal with conflicts effectively, building trust and cooperation and preventing the escalation of conflict.

### Leading at Speed of Trust

This workshop engages leaders at all levels in the real work of identifying and closing the trust gaps that exist in your organization. Instead of paying outrageous "Trust Taxes," your organization can begin to realize "Trust Dividends." Doing business at the "speed of trust" dramatically lowers costs, speeds up results, and increases influence.

# Competencies: A Blueprint for Development

Competencies are critical for your career growth and development.

In fact, you can think of them as the components of your professional development blueprint. Described below are just a few examples of how you can use the competencies to tailor your development experience

**ASSESS.** Recall that competencies set the standards and expectations for effective performance. Using the set standards you can assess your current capabilities and identify your areas of strengths and areas for improvement.

- Self and multi-rater competency assessments are available in the Talent Management System (TMS).
- 180 and 360 degree feedback assessments are available through the VA National Center for Organizational Development (NCOD).

**SELECT.** Pursue specific training and development opportunities based on the competencies you would like to target.

- Search the TMS for competency-based formal training opportunities. There are hundreds of courses in our catalog linked to specific All Employee and Leadership Competencies.

**PLAN.** Build a tailored IDP.

- You can use the competencies to build a development plan specifically tailored to your needs.

**DEMONSTRATE.** Work toward leadership certification. The Leadership Certification Program is an innovative, integrated, and *self-driven* development program tailored to your competency strengths and weaknesses.

- Identify your competency gaps, work to close them with a combination of formal training, experiential activities, self-development, and mentoring.
- Demonstrate your mastery of the concepts with competency-based assessments. Once certification is achieved, you have a credential that clearly demonstrates your abilities as an effective leader at VA.

# Conclusion

This guide was designed to provide you with an understanding of the VA Leadership Competencies. The information provided focused on the six leadership competency categories, with an overview of the specific competencies in each category. These competencies set the standards for what is necessary to achieve leadership excellence throughout the VA.

The competencies also serve as guideposts for planning your growth in the future. By building the knowledge and skills necessary to progress in your own career, you are also building the capabilities of our organization as a whole and enhancing our capacity to provide unparalleled service to our Veterans. Demonstrating these competencies will help us achieve our goals and continue providing high quality services to our Veterans. For more information on leadership and all employee competencies, go to the VALU Portal, [www.valu.va.gov](http://www.valu.va.gov).









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